Jil Plummer

from
HELEN McGRATH & ASSOCIATES
Writers' Representatives
1406 Idaho Court
CONCORD, CALIFORNIA 94521

THE SCHISM

by

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wanting a place to live. Well I thought of that empty room up front there, you sitting around all day and how a bit extra pub money wouldn't come amiss. To cut a long story short she'll be moving in around noon time."

He's lying, Grace told herself, trying to scare me. The room was silent but for the clock on the wall as father and daughter stared at each other.

"Hadn't you better be moving? Three hours and she'll be here. Miss Warren's her name."

It couldn't be true. Could it? Grace's eyes broke from his and flashed in panic around the room.

Tom Daly laughed and prodded between his teeth with a fork. "Beginning to believe me eh? Lazy bitch. Don't like the idea do ee?"

"But Da ..." The faint plea escaped her.

"Don't "but" me, woman." He stood up and scratched his belly, then went to the door. "Mind ee don't let the lass see thee to plain lest she get frighted off afore she finds you're harmless. I'll blame you if she leaves, I'm tired of only affording beer." Hand on the door knob he stared at Grace, then threw his head back in a great gaffaw and slammed his way along the passage and out the back door.

Stunned, Grace tried to still her thoughts. A stranger here - to laugh at and ridicule her in her own house? There'd be no place to run to, nowhere to hide. And sleeping in mother's bed! Whimpers tugged at her throat and her hands rubbed

each other.

Leaving the table she slowly walked through the house as though bidding it farewell. The dining room with the mahogany table no one had sat at since mother died, the parlor small and quiet where mother had knitted and told her stories, the sitting room with the quiety solemnity of fine antiques polished and lovingly cared for. No stranger should ever come into these rooms, break the quiet in which she hid, stir the memories perhaps bringing evil ones back to life.

Grace limped heavily upstairs. Would the stranger look through her stained glass on the landing? Mock the strange world seen through its panes? Grace stood on the threshold of her mother's room then crossed to the window. No longer could she crouch here to look up at the protecting hill, listen to snatches of conversation and sometimes a laugh from the street. How would she bear it!

A ray of sunlight struck the church spire severe against dark elms at the other end of the village and Grace's hands flew to cover her eyes. Now she understood, this was another trial from God and she must bear it bravely.

With determined steps she gathered cleaning things and fluttered about the room still dustfree from yesterday's polishing. "I'm sorry, mother, I'm sorry," she murmered as she smoothed lavender scented sheets over the feather mattress and ran a cloth down the bed's four posts. The familiar routine soothed her so she almost forgot why she did it. Her fingers, through

the duster, followed the carvings on the massive cherrywood wardrobe and she polished the mirror on its front which gave another window and village street to the room. When she filled the water jug and set it in its basin on the marble wash-stand in the corner she admired the pink cherubs that frolicked across the white china, then she shook and folded the towels that lay beside it.

One by one she looked into the pictures on the walls. Dear old friends and she stroked them with the dustcloth . The biggest was an etching of three enormous work horses who ate hay while two doves preened serenely by their noses. Grace almost heard soft cooing and steady munching and wished she could give the horses an apple and feel their muzzles on her palm. She ran a finger down their foreheads and turned to the gentle eyed lady with the sad smile behind whom wild moorland stretched to the horizon. "Lorna Doone" said the scrolled writing on the frame beneath and Grace touched the hair that blew softly 'round the lovely face.

A car beeped outside jolting her back to reality and a swooping sensation shivered her insides as she remembered the stranger. Taking a last look around she began to leave, then stopped. The spider, she'd almost forgotten. Scurrying to the window Grace stood on tiptoe and reached up its edge bringing her hand away with a small brown spider running across it, then she forced the window open enough to slide her fingers out over the sill. "I'm sorry little one, she may kill you if

I let you stay. Spring's here. You'll like it outside now." For a moment the creature clung to her then slid down its silk to land on a strand of ivy.

From the hall the Grandfather clock boomed resonantly. Grace shut the window and ran from that room to her own. Noon. The boarder would arrive any second now. Miss Warren. That was the name Da said, like a rabbit's safe home but she's invading mine. What will I do? What will I say? I can't! I'll hide. She'll go away.

Grace sat on her bed and watched her twisting hands, ears straining, stomach churning. In a moment the bell would ring and she would have to greet the intruder, there was no escape. What had mother said when she'd met someone at the door? "Hello" Grace blurted the word out. That wasn't right, something more polite. "Good morning, do come in." That was it. But wasn't it afternoon now? Maybe the clock was fast. Perhaps the stranger wouldn't know. Oh dear it was all so difficult. Grace licked her lips and began to limp up and down the room, stopping often to listen. What if noone had explained about her! Told how ugly she was. Would the stranger be horrified and run away? Would she laugh? Grace went to the wardrobe and took from among her few clothes a voluminous green sweater which she draped across her shoulders in hopes it might camaflage her deformity. But there was no way to hide the shortness of her left leg, the awkward swing of her hip and ungainly sway of her body when she moved. Even the black skirt down to her

ankles couldn't hide that.

Footsteps grated on the gravel beneath her window. Grace listened - motionless- then stealthily crept to her curtain and peeked around the edge. Below was a shining head of golden hair. Something about it caught at her memory and for a moment she watched the sun catch the reds and shimmer across the rich glowing coat of a golden puppy. Grief turned over in her heart.

The doorbell shrilled demandingly, forcing her with whimpers of fear down the stairs until she stood before the solid oak door. She stood unable to touch it until a second strident ring made her turn the iron latch and pull it toward her. The door rasped across the rough flagstones of the hall and when it was wide Grace, eyes to the ground, whispered, "Good morning, do come in."

She felt the person looking at her and desperately reached for the handle of the suitcase in front of her. Again she whispered, "Do come in." and turned to struggle with her awkward load across the hall to the stairs. Footsteps followed her and she imagined the eyes mocking her clumsy progress. Tears burned close and she fought for breath as she tried not to let the suitcase bang on the steps. At last she reached the top and panting, pushed open the door to mother's room. She set the case down inside then pressed her back against the wall, watching the shadow that followed her in and took posession.

"What a terrific room! With a view of the hill too. I

never expected this!"

For the first time Grace looked up at the young woman who faced away from her. She saw tawny tousled hair and long limbs that flowed strong and lithe like the deer she had watched long ago from the castle steps. The room was quiet and she felt the peace of the Deerpark she had almost forgotten. When the girl turned toward her she stayed looking up into brown eyes, clear and gentle, and felt a sudden quickening of the love she had felt for those animals of her childhood. Then it left leaving only fear and desperate shyness.

"Oh, Miss Daly, it's a perfect room! I don't know why I was so rude as not to introduce myself. I'm Brandy, Brandy Warren."

Grace looked back down at the floor and wondered if she could leave yet but the voice continued.

"Thanks an awful lot for carrying my suitcase. I shouldn't have let you, after all I'm as strong as a horse." The girl gave a nervous laugh followed by a moments silence. "I do hope you don't mind my being here? It was your father who arranged it through Gilbert ... I don't want to be a trouble ..."

"Of course," Grace whispered, confused, then frightened. Da would be furious if the boarder said she felt unwanted. "I'm glad to have you." Choking on her shyness she backed from the room, then turned and ran for the stairs pausing on the landing to look through the gold-stained part of the window. Clumps of blossom flared and became ingots on the apple tree while

windblown grass flowed and surged like a river of molten sunlight around its foot. Submerged in this world she grew calm and gained strength to continue to the kitchen where she went straight to a pail of risen dough into which she thrust her hands and began to knead. Up and down they plunged in the moist glutinous mass and the rhythm caught her up in it so that when a sound came from behind she whirled and tipped the bucket on its side.

Miss Warren ran forward and righted it. "Golly Im sorry, I didn't mean to startle you!"

Grace searched for words but none came so she dove her hands back into the dough's concealing softness. What does she want, she thought, why does she come in here? A drop of sweat ran from one armpit and she knew her nose was beaded.

When the girl spoke again it was not with the expected criticism but with a gentleness Grace had forgotten existed.

"I love to make bread, don't you?" The voice was low and soothing as a dove's. "My mother makes it every week and lets us sometimes if we're good."

Grace's heart raced and the only sound was the schlumph, schlumph of the dough.

"I shouldn't be bothering you. I just wondered what time you serve dinner?"

Grace's hands stopped. She hadn't thought of meals. Quickly her mind raced through the hours. Better if she could feed the boarder separate from Da. Wait till he was gone to the pub though she could never be sure. "Seven?"

"Seven'll be fine and please don't go to any trouble on my account, I'm not in the least fussy. Now I'd better get back to work or Gilbert'll shoot me." She smiled and was gone.

Grace listened to the outside door close and the footsteps fade. She and the house were alone again. She shaped the dough into pans and popped them into the oven, then wiping her hands on her apron she went upstairs. The door to her mother's room wasn't latched and she pushed it with one finger. It swung open by itself and she saw that the curtains were drawn wide letting sunlight stream in as it hadn't anywhere in the house for years. The suitcase lay open on the bed with a black sweater lying beside it. A brush and comb were on the washstand. The room already belonged to somebody else, mother would never come back to it now. Grace backed into the hall and softly closed the door.

In the kitchen she worried about what to prepare for supper. It would have to be a full sized dinner, not the bits and pieces they usually had. Would the tinned ham be good enough? If she'd have known she could have ordered more groceries yesterday in the note she wrote to be picked up as each order was left. She fetched carrots and potatoes from the cellar and got to work. She made cookies and blancmange for dessert and the kitchen filled with good smells as the afternoon passed, and often the picture of the girl as she had stood in front of the window looking like a beautiful deer came into

Grace's mind.

At five her father appeared. "Did she come?"

"Yes Da."

"Treat her well mind but give her no more than her money's worth, d'you hear?"

"Yes Da."

"And get her rent tonight. One month in advance it is."

"Oh ... I ..."

"What? Where's my dinner, can't stay looking at your stupid face all night."

He ate and soon left for the pub.

Grace fluttered about like a frightened sparrow, setting a single place at the long-unused dining room table. She set it twice; first with everyday cutlery and plates then, remembering that the best should be brought out for guests, she took them back to the kitchen and returned with mother's silver and willow pattern china. As an afterthought she put a small silver bell next the cut crystal water glass.

Everything ready she waited, mouth dry and hands rubbing. The grating of the outside door startled her and she listened intently as it shut and footsteps ran upstairs. Must be going to wash then she'd be down to eat. Grace rushed about sniffing and prodding the food - everything seemed perfect - now if only it would be enjoyed.

The sound of someone approaching almost made her run and hide but she managed to pull herself together and was carving

the ham when she felt Miss Warren enter the kitchen. Grace didn't look up.

"Good evening, Miss Daly. Wow it smells good in here!"

Grace gestured toward the dining room and poured soup into a blue and white bowl. With shaking hands she carried it to the table as Miss Warren sat at her place.

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble, you'll spoil me."

Grace barely heard, she was too busy worrying about asking for the rent. How could she possibly do it, she hadn't even been able to say good evening.

"Before I forget let me give you the rent, I expect you'd like it in advance. Mmm this soup's delicious!"

Grace, overwhelmed with relief, took the envelope from the table. "Thank you, Miss, thank you!" she whispered and scurried into the kitchen.

Several times the girl tried to start a conversation as Grace padded in and out but Grace was completely tongue tied and terrified she'd drop something or bring ridicule on herself in someway. She felt better after she'd served dessert and as she brought in coffee she paused and looked at the room. Light glowed off rich wood paneling, the table and its setting expressed elegance and the girl belonged. The auburn hair, healthy skin. How regally she sat and how gracefully she moved her hands. She belonged.

"What's the matter, Miss Daly?"

"Nothing, Miss. Your coffee." Grace rushed forward with it.

Later when Miss. Warren had gone upstairs, to write letters she'd said, Grace washed dishes deep in thought. Perhaps everything would be all right. It was good to see someone strong and beautiful about the place. Suddenly she remembered she'd forgotten to ask about breakfast. Well whatever time Miss. Warren wanted it it would be ready if she had to stay awake all night to do it.

CHAPTER IV

The clock had chimed midnight some time ago. A mouse squeaked inside the wall and something moved downstairs. Coals falling through the grate, Grace decided staring into darkness.

The line of light under mother's door had been strangely comforting when she had passed it coming to her room. It made the whole house seem different, fuller somehow. She had heard the click of the light when it was turned off later, then later still the clumsy return of her father from the pub.

Now, the only one awake, her thoughts turned and twisted, bringing to life a new worry. Will Miss Warren stay here, living in a house with someone as ugly as I am? Hasn't Da told me a thousand times no one could look at me without feeling ill? Oh I don't want her to go. Perhaps if I stay out of sight as much as possible and do everything I can to make her comfortable ...

Grace saw the golden hair, straight back and long legs.

How wonderful to be perfect; to laugh and run, be strong and unafraid. I should have been like that.

She must stay, Grace thought drowsily, and I'll watch as I did once from the steps of the castle.

Deer grazed among ferns, stepping delicately, sleek hides rippling. One lifted it's head to look at her with calm eyes then with a bound left the clearing, followed by the others. Grace watched as they darted through the wood then burst out onto the side of the hill, sunlight sparking their coats as they floated with long effortless leaps. How she longed to run with them. "You can," something whispered and she tried - felt herself falling, falling ...

Bong! Bong! What time is it? I didn't mean to sleep! Grace scrambled out of bed and into her clothes. I must have breakfast ready - I can't be late!

Quietly she crept along the passage. Nothing else moved and soon she was enclosed in the warmth of the kitchen. The clock said five past three.

After stirring the stove and putting in more coal she made a cup of tea which she drank sleepily huddled in the old leather armchair in the corner.

Dozing and watching the clock alternately she heard the first cock's crow and a little while later a board creaked upstairs, sending her into a whirlwind of activity; cutting bread, boiling water, setting eggs out to be put in at the right moment. She combed her hair in the tiny washroom off the scullery and

put on a fresh apron. When her boarder entered the kitchen Grace was pouring tea.

"Good morning, Miss Daly."

Grace nodded and put hot toast and soft boiled eggs next to the orange juice and oatmeal. "I...I hope ... the dining room's so chill...?"

"Of course, its much nicer in here. You really mustn't worry about me so."

Grace refilled the girl's teacup but her hand shook and a splash ran down the side. "Oh!" She stood back but Miss Warren didn't seem to notice so she crept to the chair in the corner where she couldn't be seen.

Her eyes rested on the slim back in the black turtle neck sweater and she longed to touch the hair that swung to a straight line just below the shoulderblades. She noticed that the slender feet twisted under the table as though the girl too were nervous. Surely there was another reason, perhaps the eggs weren't right.

After too short a time Miss Warren stood up to go and Grace reached for the bag she had ready on the counter and rushed forward with it. "Y...Your lunch." She looked up pleading it would be all right.

"Why how thoughtful of you. Thanks tons! See you this evening."

Grace waited until she heard the outside door close then scuttled across the hall to the parlour window through which she

watched the slim figure walk up the street. Everything had gone all right. The girl hadn't seemed disgusted or put off her food by her presence. In fact she'd eaten everything. The street seemed suddenly empty as the figure turned into the stable yard half way up it and disappeared. What would she say to the people she worked with? To Gilbert the groom? Grace's hands kneaded each other as she went back to the kitchen to prepare for the descent of her father.

Tom Daly grunted and stuffed the envelope she had put on the table into his pocket. He had grinned when he'd looked at the check and muttered, " tis whiskey for me now boys."

In a rare good temper he noisily ate everything Grace put in front of him, not speaking again until he pulled on his boots. "I'll be away to Kidderminster sales with the Colonel's sheep and I want no complaints from Miss Warren when I return. Hear?"

"Yes, Da, but I need more food."

"More food! What the hell ... nothing fancy for her mind. Give me a list and I'll drop it to the store as I pass. Now, quick, pack me a clean shirt to take."

Grace put a few things in a bag but she couldn't believe he was really going until she saw him drive out of the village in the cattle truck. Then she drew a deep breath. Five days of freedom, five days when she didn't have to fear his being home the same time as the boarder and berating her in front of

those brown eyes that had so far only looked on her with kindness. Perhaps they would change and side with him.

Grace set to work cleaning as she did every day only to-day was different. She dried dishes to gleaming readiness to set before the girl at night, polished banisters for the sensitive hands and timorously entered the front bedroom where she made the bed and dusted moving as reverently as though she were in church. It seemed a completely different room from mother's and Grace could smell a faint essence of new mown hay blown across summer fields. She would have liked to stay longer but there was much to be done and soon she was in the kitchen rolling pastry for steak and kidney pie, baking biscuits and cookies for the noon lunch bag, whipping dessert, peeling potatoes. She completely forgot her own lunch and at five o'clock sat down for a moment's rest and fell asleep for half an hour, waking startled, afraid she'd wasted time.

At six she was by the parlor window, flour washed from hands and face, wearing a clean apron. The table was set and the meal ready. Soon the girl approached through the dusk and when she reached the garden gate Grace scurried to the kitchen.

"Good evening, Miss Daly."

Grace nodded and cut into a new loaf of bread. All day she had looked forward to this moment and now all she could think of was the ugliness of her own hands working in front of her. Suddenly her every deformity seemed magnified; She was a goblin who should stay hidden in dark places.

Busying herself among pots and pans she waited until the girl had gone into the dining room then she rushed in and out with food, making sure her boarder wanted for nothing but posessed always with the necessity to get out of sight as soon as possible. Safely in the kitchen again, she crept to the crack in the door and watched the golden head bent over the meal, admired the hands that worked knife and fork, followed with her eyes the smooth curve of cheek and neck.

"You're a marvellous cook, Miss Daly, thank you."

The meal was over but Miss Warrens smile stayed with Grace as she watched the strong legs run upstairs, and she heard the words again and again as she washed dishes.

After years in a vacuum Grace's days were now full of anticipation, terror and the joy of her secret watching. She crept into the garden and cut spring roses for the table, frightening as it was for her to be outside. She made special treats for the lunch bag she left by the door each morning feeling the same thrill as when she had sneaked apples to Joker and Duke long ago, and she polished the mirror in the boarder's bedroom so it would reflect its occupant without a flaw though it pained her to catch glimpses of her own reflection as she did it.

Sometimes Miss Warren tried to talk to her, out of politeness Grace thought. She'd soon learn she didn't have to bother. Didn't have to pay any attention to her landlady at all. All she had to do was like living here and never want to leave.

Six days since she came. It seemed forever and no time all at once, Grace mused as she set the lonely but elegant place setting. She eased one of her favorite yellow roses among the pink ones in the middle of the table.

A door slammed and a rose fell sideways knocked by her hand. She froze at the sound of heavy boots; Da was back! Already she smelt the sweat and liquor of him.

"Graceless!"

She scurried into the kitchen. Slumped in the armchair her father raised a foot encased in a filthy wellington.

"Pull it off!"

Grace struggled her hands slipping in muck from the sheep pens. One boot removed she worked on the other, tugging with all her might until it suddenly pulled free tipping her onto her back on the floor.

A blast of laughter filled the room. "Who needs a circus with you around. 'Ere pour me a drink."

Quickly on her feet Grace took the whiskey bottle he had taken from his jacket pocket and poured some into a glass, then she took the boots outside and stopped in the washroom to clean up and change her apron. The sound of someone entering the house told her Miss Warren had returned from work. The moment she had tried to avoid, when the boarder and Da would eat at the same time, was upon her and she had never been less prepared. She stood in the cold little room afraid to leave it.

"Grace!"

She must go. After refilling her father's glass Grace darted to the oven to turn the potatoes. Heat swirled about her face and suddenly she heard the sharp ting of a bell. She closed the oven door and leaned against it. The bell rang again. Slowly she limped to the dining room and faced her father who sat at the one carefully prepared setting.

"Da, the boarder sits there." Her hands twisted and rubbed.

"What's that ye say?"

Grace cringed and her father's red face filled the room.

"Ya mean I can't eat at me own table in me own house?"

His roar took Grace back to the terror of the years his voice had continuously battered her.

"Best silver's too good for me eh? Stupid bitch, for two pins I'd sell thees to a side show and get me a proper housekeeper. Get my dinner!"

His eyes shifted and he grinned toward the girl who cautiously entered the room. "Sit down lass. Grace'll have thee a spot set in no time. 'Tween the two of us we'll get some service here."

Grace looked at the floor, numb with humiliation.

"Well you great gargoyle, deaf as well now are ye? Get!"

Grace ran. Scarcely knowing what she did she brought in more silver and then the soup. As she set her father's in front of him he jogged her arm, splashing scalding liquid over her wrist. Not expecting this trick from long ago Grace allowed

one quickly drawn breath to give away her pain before retreating to the sanctuary of the kitchen. From behind the door she watched the two and nursed her arm.

She saw the girl set down her spoon with her soup barely tasted. She mustn't like it and the thought made Grace more miserable than ever. Da guzzled noisily, darting glances at his companion.

He pushed his empty dish away. "Graceless, get food in here woman!"

Running, Grace cleared away, brought dishes and forgot things in her confusion. Always she heard her father's voice and felt the eyes of her boarder.

"Got to keep 'er jumping y'know. A thing like her needs to be kept in line. Her mother named her Grace but I calls her Graceless 'cause that's what she is." He laughed heartily and belched.

Shrunken with misery Grace grieved over some faint unrecognized hope that was being murdered.

"Y'don't know what a trial it is to have a freak for a daughter ..."

On and on the words ran - tumbling on top of her - and through it all she saw the food left on the girl's plate and knew that for all her trying tonight the meal failed to please. Despair beat in Grace's chest like a captured bird.

At last she stood alone in the middle of the kitchen feeling bruised and stripped naked, her every deformity exposed.

"Bring my whiskey, woman!" Her father bellowed from his room.

Grace slowly shook her head to try and remove the black pain that filled it then she got the bottle her father requested and dragged herself upstairs.

CHAPTER V

Warm and safe Grace lay in a cocoon of leftover sleep. Slowly remembrance of last night seeped through and she curled tight, clenching her fists, knees touching chin. "ow could she possibly face today? Face the girl? At least it was Sunday and she need see no one till after church; could leave breakfast ready for them to help themselves.

The morning passed much too quickly. She scarcely heard a word of the service as dread and the ache in her temples left room for little else. When at last she got home the house was empty. She tidied and cleaned, flinching at every sound that could mean someone's return and dinner loomed an unbearable nightmare.

But the dreaded repeat of last night was postponed for Da came home early, ate quickly and was gone again to the pub.

Grace waited, still afraid. Afraid of the look of disgust she expected in Miss Warren's lovely brown eyes when she came home and saw her. Afraid she may not come home at all.

Six-thirty. Grace polished the silverware already set out on the dining table, rewiped the glass and straightened

the newly picked roses with which she had replaced the still fresh ones as though fearing they might hold some of the evil words snagged among their petals. Then she waited at the window listening to the old house shift and sigh. "Oh God, please make her come home," she prayed, "Please."

The door, feet on the stairs, a board creaking overhead.

"Oh thank you God!"

Grace was afraid to look at the girl when she came down.

"I'm awfully sorry to be late, Miss Daly. I went for a drive with Michael and then I had to feed the horses."

Grace felt her face burn all the time she served the meal and was glad when it was over . At least the girl had eaten well . She filled the sink and thrust her hands through deep bubbles to the water below. Perhaps everything hadn't been spoiled, perhaps ... but there would be other times and she must steel herself to bear them. Must expect nothing - take what moments she could and cherish them.

Feeling a presence she looked behind and gasped to see Miss Warren there. Quickly she turned back and waited. Nothing said she looked again. The girl held a dish towel and smiled.

"I'd like to help. You work too hard."

Grace stared uncomprehending.

"Really. It doesn't feel right not to help with dishes. I've done it at home all my life."

"N - no!" Grace gasped.

"Please let me."

Grace searched her eyes and found no mockery.

"Let's be friends. I need a woman to talk to. I don't know anyone here but the men at the farm and Michael. Please call me Brandy. May I call you Grace?"

For a long moment Grace stared, then she handed a newly washed plate into the waiting hands. Her heart gave a quickly stifled leap. Don't be a fool, she told herself, hasn't Da said time and again that no one would ever ... But the deer liked me, and the horses and Sunshine. A friend. It can't be true. Brandy. What a warm lovely name.

Suddenly she became agonisingly conscious of her humped shoulder so close to the girl. Perspiration shone on her nose and she fumbled the dishes hardly noticing the voice that slowly stroked her soul into peace. After a while she listened to the words.

"So I felt at home here the first day when I saw these plates. Mother used to tell me the tale of the willow pattern when I was small and I remember how I wanted the lovers to escape from that wicked old father. I can almost hear Mum's voice now when I look at one. It's the same feeling as when I open a book of fairy tales and smell pages I read as a child. They make me believe in knights and dragons and things. You must think me a nut!"

"Oh n-no." Grace turned the water on with a rush to erace having spoken.

"I love secret places, do you? Have you read the Secret

Garden? Dad read it to us when I was a kid and I spent ages trying to find it. I think I'm still looking. Oh have we finished?"

Grace, sorry not to have another meal's worth of dishes to wash, gave a final wipe to the sink.

Brandy laughed. "I do talk a lot don't I! You'll have to learn to shut me up when I bore you. Good-night, see you in the morning!"

She left and Grace's whispered 'thank-you' was too late. Picking up the damp dishtowel Brandy had used Grace held it in both hands and recalled every word that had been said. She had been spoken to as if she were a normal person. She couldn't believe it. Of course it probably would never happen again but now she had something special to remember.

Next day was like a see-saw, throwing her from joy to despair. First Brandy came down filling the kitchen with exhuberance and youth.

"Isn't it a fantastic day, Grace! You can't imagine how well I sleep in that feather bed!"

Grace bustled about with breakfast while Brandy ate and chattered.

"If you look out around ten I'll ride by on the young horse Kismet. I'd like you to see him. I love him! He hasn't been ridden long and Gilbert's letting me train him.

"I will." Grace whispered and buttered more toast.

Brandy came back after leaving the kitchen. She held her lunch bag . "Hey Grace, I must tell you how much I appreciate the lunches you make . I never know what treats I'm going to find! Thanks tons!" With a cheshire cat grin she disappeared and Grace stayed looking at the door feeling a small smile tingle her lips.

"Where's my grub, Bitch. Got to get going I do."

The kitchen went dark with Da's entrance and the sounds as he ate were ugly. He was in a bad mood which made him shout even more loudly than usual and he picked at Grace for everything she did. "Get that washing done to-day. Lazy as the devil you be. Don't know how I put up with you to be sure." He finally stomped out leaving his stale liquor smell behind.

Grace worked like a whirlwind, one eye always on the clock and at ten she waited by the window. She thought Brandy would probably have forgotten her promise and drew in her breath when she saw the big horse coming down the road. He <u>was</u> beautiful; lean and powerful it seemed as though he could hardly bear to stay at a walk and he looked about with dark shining eyes. Even through the glass Grace heard his bits clink and low snorting from his wide nostrils. Brandy looked like a goddess, holding the the four reins like strands of spider's web. When she waved Grace almost wept with pleasure and the glow stayed with her as she gathered laundry from her father's room and took it to the scullery. There she scrubbed and scrubbed - filthy work clothes that must almost be rubbed bare before they looked clean -

but she scarcely noticed, her thoughts were all with the proud horse and the strong straight girl who rode him.

After hanging the clothes on the line extending from the porch she did feel weary, and taking some mending from the box sat down at the kitchen table.

"Ha, loafing again! Lazy cow!" Tom Dayly trod mud over Grace's newly scrubbed floor and flopped into his chair. "One boarder not enough to keep you busy? If you weren't so grotesque and useless maybe we could start a hotel. Get me food I'm bloody starved."

She rushed about gathering cold joint, bread and butter, vegetables to warm up from yesterday. As long as he had his whiskey he wasn't fussy and she gave it to him first.

"Sit opposite me woman when I eat 'stead of rushing about like a bloody idiot."

Grace went cold and did as he said.

"We could name our hotel The Graceless Virgin." He gaffawed at his cleverness losing a piece of meat from his mouth as he did so. "But that would be lieing wouldn't it! Mebbe the Crippled Duck would be better." He ate with relish and, waving her to stay still, refilled his plate. "I have something you'd enjoy; A rare good joke told me in the pub last night. There was this right ugly man, y' see, and he happened upon where they were putting this big bull to a cow. Well as he watched ..."

Filth smothered Grace as the words battered against her

ears. She tried to shut them out but as he talked on and on her head ached and she felt something uncurl deep inside, a feeling from long ago that frightened her.

At last, his story finished, her father scraped his chair back. Grace stayed bent like a flower trampled in the mud, her eyes on a familiar crack in the table, as with a satisfied chuckle he left the room.

Voices in the hall jerked Grace's attention toward the closed door in alarm. He had met Brandy. She couldn't bear the thought of him talking to the girl and her breath came short and quick as she listened.

"Is everything all right here for 'ee? I saw you enjoying a ride on the motorbike of that young man from the Hunt t'other evening."

Grace couldn't hear Brandy's soft reply but she knew the evil in her father's mind and wanted Brandy away from it.

"Make sure you don't let that cripple in there get lazy. Be sharp with 'er mind."

Hatred writhed like a live thing. Brandy should never have to associate with someone like Da. With a blow of realization Grace knew the girl should not be here at all; living in this house of sin with a freak and a drunk. She must go!

Posessed with the urgency of her decision Grace barely acknowledged Brandy's cheerful greeting and served dinner as though she had a contagious disease she must protect the girl from. All the time she was going over and over in her mind

what she must say. How she would tell her to find somewhere else to live; must leave before something bad happened. She would order it if necessary.

If Brandy came to help with dishes like she did last night would be the time to speak and Grace, stiff with determination, filled the sink.

When she saw Brandy's hand reach to take a washed plate from the rack Grace's intentions uncontrollably wavered and melted away. She tried to speak but the words wouldn't come and she knew she could never do it. Could never send this creature she loved away where she couldn't watch her, hear her voice nor the lightness of her step.

"What's the matter, Grace, you look pale?"

"I'm fine." I'm sorry, she wanted to say, so sorry I'm not strong enough to save you.

"Thanks for putting the letter by my bed. It was from mother. She's awfully glad I'm staying here; she hated me living over the pub those first months. Actually I didn't like it much myself."

You were better off there, Grace thought, but because you have the beauty of the deer and I love your healthy strength I can't tell you that. With a shudder she gave herself up to the pleasure of listening.

"My brothers and sisters are full of questions. You see I'm first to leave home and mother says they're all saving pocket money to come visit me."

A cluster of golden Warren children ran and played in some distant place, all straight and strong. "H-how many?" Grace had to know.

"Oh they won't really come! They're much too far away, Mother would never let them."

"I-I didn't mean ... I'd love to see ..." Grace struggled with her dismay. But I could neverlet them see me she thought with a flutter of panic. "I-I just wondered - how many?"

"Four besides me. I'm oldest, then there's Ginny, Robin, Peter and Jessica. Jessy's only five and a little devil. Spoilt as the dickens by the rest of us." Brandy broke off. "You don't want to hear all this."

"Oh yes. Please." Grace looked up thirsty for every word.

"O.K. But tell me if I bore you. Guess I'm a bit homesick, it feels awfully good to talk about them. You'd like my dad. He's tall and laughs a lot. He makes chores into fun and is terrific at helping with homework. He was a teacher in town once, before he decided he liked farming better , so he's very intelligent. He gave us all ponies just as soon as we could ride decently well. Ladybird was my first. Jessy rides her now..."

Brandy's voice rambled between splashing water and tinkling plates and Grace was far away with the golden children as they galloped fat ponies across the hills. They collected blackberries which the mother baked into juicy pies and Grace

stroked the feathers of the pet rooster and heard Lancelot, the springer spaniel, bark as he chased rabbits. She basked in the comfort of parents and a busy home.

The voice had stopped and Grace felt the water cool on her hands. She wondered how long ago she had finished the dishes. She didn't want to come back to reality.

Brandy hung her towel on the hook. "I must run if I'm to meet Michael on time. You're a good listener!"

Grace felt her lips say good-night but her imagination had already returned to run in the fields with the laughing children.

CHAPTER VI

May arrived on a Sunday and mizzling rain hid the hill as Grace started on her way to church. She shivered, drew the voluminous concealing raincoat she wore winter and summer close about her, pulled her mother's hat low over her eyes and, making sure the street was empty, began to walk the gauntlet of the village.

Although it was early morning she was weary and her head ached. It had been a trying week; her emotions being tossed every which way. Soaring as she watched or listened to Brandy, plunging to deepest misery when she was with her father. He seemed to have rediscovered his pleasure in the sport of tormenting her. Perhaps he saw that having the boarder had not made life unbearable as he had hoped; whatever it was he went out of his way to tear down and trample the slivers of beauty that crept into Grace's day. Luckily there had been no repetition of his dinner with Brandy but each hour carried the underlying threat that it must happen again and as evening

approached Grace often felt ill.

Today as always she made this agonizing journey early before other churchgoers had finished their breakfasts. As a girl she had looked about her at the wide street, imagining the fairs held there in Saxon times, now she saw nothing but wet pavement. With a sigh of relief she reached the narrow tree shrouded path to the church and finally pushed the huge groaning door, its metal latch cold against her fingers.

Echoing, her uneven footsteps rang on the stone floor under which long dead people lay buried and she was glad to sidle into her pew and press, shivering, against the massive stone pillar. She was alone but for the alabaster effigies of lords and their ladies who lay on tombs in the musty darkness.

After a while shuffling began. Coughs and whispers pushed aside the silence and Grace crouched smaller inside her tentlike coat feeling people crowd about her. The choir drowned everything with "Onward Christian Soldiers" and Grace, from the corner of her eye, watched them sway past to settle in their stalls. Soon in the familiarity of the service she was able to forget herself, watching with fascination the red face of the small boy who energetically pumped the organ, and the bird-like lady who pecked the keys beside him, rocking back and forth, eyebrows raised in seeming astonishment at the rumbling sounds she produced as the choir raced to keep up with them. With an exhultant Amen they all finished together and sat amid rustling and preening of robes.

The vicar intoned prayers which Grace followed with fervor and she whispered hymns never having to look at her book for words. During the bible reading her concentration was stolen by a mouse that ran back and forth along a ledge beside the organ. Grace saw the organist go red then snap the pages of her hymnal to frighten him away

Startled by a booming chord Grace realized she had missed the whole reading and sent up a quick prayer for forgiveness, concentrating on each word of the next hymn to make up for it.

With a swish of starched robes the vicar swept to the pulpit. "Honor thy parents." His voice snapped like a whip and his eyes burned into Grace like those of a condemning judge, pulling her to the edge of her bench.

"Whoso curseth his father or his mother - his lamp shall be put out in obscure darkness and the eye that mocketh at his father, the ravens of the valley shall eat it. The bible says it over and over again and I say it: children must obey their parents in the Lord for this is one of the first commandmants given us." The vicar rose on his toes and seemed to hover over Grace, making empty years roll back to reveal her sin. She remembered the last wish of her mother and the forbidden hatred for her father that had tormented her youth. Now she recognized it. Knew it had returned that awful night at dinner, growing with each word her father spoke, spreading inside her each day since. God would surely punish her. And mother? She hadn't

thought of her for days - not once opened her bible so the poem could remind her. Oh mother! Grace stared hypnotized into the vicar's eyes.

"The Lord sees all and I know there are violations of this commandment right here in Linlea."

Grace remembered how the secret voices in her head long ago had tempted her to do terrible things to her father so she had had to run to her bible and bury herself in its pages until the voices stopped. She thought the years had killed them but now they were back and God and the vicar knew.

The condemnation of each person in this holy place seemed to bear down on her and whispers hissed from the statues. "Honor thy father! Obey a mother's death wish. He is your father. Honor him. Honor him!"

"And I leave you with these words said by Jonathan Edwards in 1740: All children are by nature children of wrath and are in danger of eternal damnation in hell. So I say lift yourselves up and escape this fate. Honor thy parents!"

Grace's hands rubbed furiously. "Glory be to the Father..." She joined numbly in the rest of the service and as the choir sang its way out she pressed her eyes to her knuckles and stayed on her knees.

Shuffling feet. Then silence. Grace lifted her face to the crucified figure who looked sadly from the window above the altar. "Please forgive me. I'll try harder, don't you despise me too!" Her whisper rose to a pleading cry that melted

among the tombs.

After a few moments she slipped through the side door and crossed wet grass to her mother's grave where she sank down, a small warped figure under the dripping elms.

"You're late. Half past dinner time and you bloody stroll in!"

Grace dropped her wet hat and coat on the hall stand and scrambled for the kitchen. "'Twas a long sermon, Da," she panted and ran to check the roast she had put on low before leaving that morning. She rattled coal into the stove and set the waiting pans of carrots and brussels sprouts to cook.

"You'll have to end this church going if it interferes with my dinner. You hear?"

"Yes Da."

"What? Speak up woman, your voice is like the wind in the chimney and as witless I'll be bound. Get me a drink while I wait."

The kitchen smelled rich with cooking and though warmth dried Grace's curls a chill drifted along her bones. She heard the tap of Da's knife on the dining-room table where he waited at one of the two places she set every day, just in case. "Is Miss Brandy in yet?" she whispered.

"Getting familiar aren't you, calling her that? 'Course she's in. Sitting starved in her room no doubt, wondering if

she's ever going to eat. Ah here she comes."

"My that smells good!" Grace heard Brandy say as she passed through the kitchen but she didn't look at her. Why did it have to be today? If Da started up as she knew he must, she would surely die.

"Proof of the puddings in the eating," she heard him growl.

Quietly and carefully Grace served the meal. Perhaps nothing would happen she thought as she left them with no one having spoken. She fretted as she waited to serve the next course . Everything went well until she cleared the plates for desert, then the hair rose on her neck as she read the signs: her father's eyes flickering toward her like snake's tongues, the deliberate way he wiped his mouth. She was just about to put the plate of apple pie in front of Brandy when he started.

"Well Brandy, her ladyship here gave the good Lord the honor of her company this morning. Purer than us now I reck-on, eh Grace?"

Grace felt the plate taken from her hand.

"Give the village lads a bit of a laugh singing out with the rest of 'em eh? Well speak up, did you?"

"I d-don't know Da."

"Speak up, is your voice going the same way as your brains? I expect you did. Y'must have a rare croak of a singing voice. Is that right, woman? Answer me!"

"Yes Da." Grace answered staring into the pool of black coffee she now held.

"When I were a lad and was sent to church I remember a woman who sang like a rusty gate, kind of like you must. We had rare sport with her we did, doing imitations from the pew behind and such like. She stopped coming after a while but it were fun while it lasted." He forked hunks of pie into his mouth between words and now paused for a swig of the whiskey he drank now almost as freely as he once had beer.

Grace became conscious of Brandy's strained stillness. Her face was flushed and her fork lay unused by her plate. Da's talk was upsetting her! Rage rushed through Grace in a hot wave and with it came the voices. "Throw the coffee!" "Blind him!" The cup rattled on its saucer and Grace felt them taken from her with a gentle"thank-you" as Brandy set them on the table. Oh God, she thought, I nearly did it. Help me!

"Why do you go to church Grace? Do you think the Lord can straighten bodies as well as souls? You think He'll do one of his miracles and send you home a good looking wench? That'll be the day!" He clapped his hands giving a gleeful bark. "Is that why you go Grace? Answer me!" Reaching out he grasped Grace's wrist and stared into her desperate face. "Is it?"

"Stop it!" Both Grace's and her father's heads turned toward Brandy whose eyes flashed as she stood with her knuckles

pushing down on the table. "It's inhuman the way you talk to your own daughter and I damn well won't listen to it. You're a bully, Mr. Daly, a bloody bully!"

Grace daren't look at her father but she felt his bafflement as he let go her arm and reached for his drink. "Well," he said, "I'll be."

The room was silent and nothing moved but sparkles on the chandelier as the two finished their coffee and Grace stood against the wall.

"I must get back to the stables. One of the horses cut himself and the vet's coming at two. See you later, Grace," Brandy said and left, the color still in her cheeks.

Grace daren't move. Da would surely punish her but all she thought was how wonderful Brandy had been. No one ever talked back to Da ...

"Smile will you, bloody little bitch. I'll teach you to laugh at me. Get this table cleared!" The lifting of his arm sent Grace backward but instead of coming after her as she expected he flung a plate to crash above her head. Then another and another. Blue and white pieces showered about her feet as her mother's willow pattern china cascaded about her, thudding off her body and the hands she put up to protect her face. Out of breath he stopped and leaned on the table.

Automatically Grace crouched to pick up the pieces but her hands shook and dropped them back to the floor. She kept trying, to stop would be to step into the next terrible moment,

but finally she stood and saw her father, glaring and half-crouched like a boxer, between her and the door.

"Now, my bitch, now," he snarled and grasped her arm, shooting pain to her shoulder. "You need reminding of a thing or two."

He dragged her whimpering up the stairs and down the hall to the spare bedroom. A full length mirror stood at one end and he jolted her upright before it. "Look, look well. Look at that ugly face. That dwarf standing on crooked legs. See that disgusting creature!"

Grace struggled to turn her face away but he grasped her chin and forced it to the front. Her grotesqueness stared back at her. He wrenched her sideways. "See that hump on your back? That's you. Those hands that should be on a blacksmith's arms? That travesty of a woman? That's what you are and be glad of me 'cause no one else would bother with you. That do-gooder of a boarder doesn't give a tinker's cuss for you, just wants those cakes and cookies you fuss over, that's her game. She wouldn't be seen dead outside with you. Why you should hear what she says about you to that boyfriend of hers. Laugh at you she does so you remember that and get shut of any smart ideas."

Grace couldn't breath. She was fainting.

"Downstairs and earn your keep!" Da flung her toward the door where she fell to her knees. Blindly she staggered to her feet and down to the kitchen where she huddled against the stove.

The stained glass window as she'd passed had been just a frightening jumble of colors waiting to snare her.

Slowly the roar in her ears quieted and all she heard was the tick of the clock and rain slapping against the window. A door slammed, waking the pain in her head, and she knew her father had left for the pub.

Grace went like a sleepwalker to the cleaning cupboard where she pulled out cloths and a tin of furniture polish. With them clutched in her arms she limped toward the front of the house.

CHAPTER VII

The sitting room was the largest in the house, with a high ceiling and the floor muffled with ancient carpets. Fine antiques stood everywhere and shadows blended into each other as wine colored drapes masked the tall windows. A long unused stone fireplace yawned guarded by gleaming brass dogs and in the wall alongside were shelves of leather bound books serenely protecting long unread pages. The air smelled rich and aged and the woodwork of tables, chairs and desk testified to frequent polishing. Not a speck of dust nor a dulling of brass could be found anywhere except for the large mirror on the east wall. It had not been touched for a very long time.

Grace came like a wounded animal to its lair and went straight to the slender legged sheriton table in the darkest corner. Her eyes were unseeing and over and over she heard her father's voice: "Doesn't care a tinker's cuss - laughs about you."

The gentleness of the room drew her into it as she spread a layer of wax over the table's inlaid top. Then she began to polish. The waxen haze disappeared under her soft

cloth and a glow started deep down in the heart of the wood, growing and shimmering in the textures beneath the surface. Round and round she rubbed, body swaying to the hypnotic circling of her arm. In the semi-darkness the burnished wood flickered with light and the warmth of it burned into the emptiness of her eyes, soothing the hurt behind them. It was as though all the hands that had polished before her reached out with understanding and tenderness to ease her pain, and slowly it receded to where it always waited.

Grace moved to the ornately carved desk. The smiling puffed cheeks of angels became lustrous under her hand, her fingers worked the cloth among feathers of a pheasant perched in a whimsical tree and stroked the manes of two roaring lions, darting quickly between their toothless gums. She worked with love on the desk's elegant legs and clawed feet and nothing existed but the wood as she brought it to glowing life.

"How beautiful!"

The voice was startling and Grace turned toward the figure silhouetted in the doorway and wrestled to bring her mind into focus. Light from the hall limned red-gold hair stilling the panic that had begun to grow. Grace fluttered helplessly, dazed, trying to pull her thoughts together, to remember ...

"Gilbert's bedding the horses down. We'll take turns now it's summer so we can have alternate sunday afternoons off."

"You must be hungry. Supper..." Grace reached for

the polish.

"No, it's only four." Brandy looked around the room then back at Grace. "Hey Grace, I'm awfully sorry about dinner. I just couldn't stand his speaking to you like that. Did I get you into trouble?"

Grace looked down at the cloths in her hands . "He always ..."

"But you shouldn't let him!"

Grace looked at Brandy in panic. It was like the voices ... She started toward the door.

"Grace!" The sharpness in Brandy's voice stopped her, then it turned soft. "Tell me about this fantastic furniture. This table looks priceless. My uncle's in the antique business so I know a little about it. Has this been in your family for long?"

"G-great grandfather's. They're mine now. Mother left them to me." Pride glowed for an instant to be chased by fear. "Don't tell Da they're valuable. He'd sell them. I couldn't bear it."

"I won't mention it, I promise. But Grace if they're yours and the house ..."Brandy shook her head and began to walk around the room trailing her hand very gently over the satin-like surfaces.

Dusky as the deerpark at twilight it was and Grace saw a deer among the trees and scarcely breathed.

"You must miss your mother. What was she like?"

Illusion vanished but the feeling of being in a glade was still there as Grace searched her memory for the woman who for so long had been only a white shape in a bed and a poem in a bible.

"Good she was. Quiet and kind. Every morning we'd look out at the hill. See Spring make it soft, Fall colors, then the hill sharp again. She told me stories."

"What about?"

"The village. She grew up here. Knew all its secrets. Night of a full moon sometimes we'd watch for the stone elephant to come from the top of the hill and drink from the stream."

"I've seen that elephant. He's in a hollow by the tower." Brandy's voice was a sighing in the trees.

"Mother told me all about him. He'd been dedicated to the sun by druids, she said, and if you climb onto his back and wish your wish will come true."

Grace stopped, thinking of the elephant that had once seemed the key to happiness. As a child she had dreamed of the day she'd be strong enough to climb up to him and wish. Wish to be tall and straight and strong .... just like Brandy.

"How did your mother die?"

Grace's mind snapped shut and she darted into the hall. "Supper, I must get supper."

Scurrying toward the kitchen she fought the memory that stirred forbidden thoughts and instead saw again the

deformed woman in the mirror upstairs. You are a fool Grace, she told herself, forgetting so soon; believing the girl was interested in your talk of elephants and mother. What if she does just speak to me for my cooking and the care I give her, does it matter? I can still watch her.

Grace looked out the kitchen window, seeing rain spill from the eaves and trees fade into the mist. It had been such a long day and she felt quite dizzy. Must make supper for one, Da would have been home by now were he coming. She put food on the table and went up to bed before Brandy came in, being too weary to face another moment of this endless sunday.

Next morning she left Brandy's breakfast ready and when she heard her approaching hid in the scullery and watched through a crack in the door. Brandy looked around for a moment then sat down to eat, pausing now and again as though to listen. Grace was afraid to move and closed her eyes for fear the intensity of her stare would cause the girl to see her. Soon she opened them again admiring every move Brandy made and was sorry when, with a last glance around, she put her dishes in the sink and left.

When she heard the outer door click shut Grace ran to the window and watched the lithe figure swing down the street, early sunlight catching in her hair. She is so fine, so lovely, she thought, it doesn't matter if she never talks to me again.

Her father arrived still half asleep, surly and comp-

laining. "Bloody rheumatics. Chewing up my joints they is. Colonel'll have to do without me today." He helped himself to whiskey before eating.

Grace found it difficult to get her work done as he sat in the big kitchen chair demanding attention like a petulant child.

"Where's the paper? Where is it woman?"

She ran in from sweeping the hall. "Here, Da, right on the table."

"Out of my way. Leave me be." But a few minutes later, "Grace! Grace! Put some coal on, tis bloody freezing in here."

The room was stifling but she did as he ordered.

When he finally slept, mouth open and glass tipping over his waistcoat, Grace escaped to Brandy's room. As she cleaned it she glanced often through the window but no horse came clattering down the street and a feeling of loneliness brought her close to tears. "You're going daft," she told herself aloud, and went to her own room where she spent an hour bent over her bible.

At four o'clock Da ordered bread and cheese, then pulled himself together enough to stagger off to the pub. He mumbled something about how he should tell"that uppity boarder to clear out" but then again "her brass do come in handy." Grace knew his love of whiskey was stronger than his pride and Brandy was safe. "Wait up for me," were his last words and wearily Grace dreaded the long hours of awaiting his drunken return.

But first there was Brandy to feed and that night Grace served dinner silently, slipping quickly up to her room as soon as she could. There she waited, empty and hurting until she heard Brandy leave the house, then she went down to wash dishes, dreaming of the voice that wasn't there.

The following days were the same, Da leaving only to visit the dingy "Star" outside the village where the rougher laborers gathered. He was seldom sober and at night Grace met him with the coffee he demanded, listening to his abuse, sometimes dodging a blow, almost to tired to care.

He avoided Brandy and when she was home Grace was like a worshipping ghost, making things as perfect as she could, keeping herself almost invisible. But she watched, through cracks, out of windows, from dark rooms into light; and she listened to footsteps on the stair, a small cough, movement in mother's room. These moments and when she did chores for the girl gave Grace happiness and she tried to forget the dream of their being friends.

On Thursday night she waited hidden in the pantry for Brandy to leave after eating. Brandy had commented on how good the mushroom omlette tasted and Grace went over and over the sweet words in her head.

"Grace?"

For a moment she didn't realize the voice was real and very close.

"What's wrong, Grace? I hardly ever see you now. I thought we were friends."

Grace wanted to run but there was no place to go so she looked at the floor and twisted her hands.

"Don't you want me to live here anymore? Is that it?"

"Oh no!" Grace looked up in panic. "It's because... because ..."

"Because of something your father said? Grace you shouldn't believe him. You know he just wants to make you feel bad."

"But you can't... I-I'm so ugly ..."

"Now that is foolish thinking. Why don't you come back into the kitchen and let me help with dishes like before and we'll forget these past days. I have all sorts of things to tell you."

Hope dared to flicker, died, and flared again.

"Coming?" Brandy led the way and Grace followed. Brandy picked up a towel and smiled at her.

Grace managed a strained smile back and went quickly to the sink as salt filled her throat. A tear squeezed from one eye and spilled down her nose. It was as though her soul had changed to sea water and wanted to wash her away, floating on surging billows of hope. She couldn't see and collected dishes blindly.

"I got a letter from home the other day. Jessy's got chicken-pox and mother says she looks like a currant cake."

"Oh dear!" said Grace but her soul was joining together

again and the fearful loneliness and feeling of loss was gone.

"She'll be O.K. You must hear what those kids have been up to though. Going into the pig business on their own they are, with Pete spending six month's pocket money on two Landrace runts from Mr. Sidcup ..."

Grace lost herself in Brandy's world and when the girl had left with a cheerful "Good-night, see you tomorrow," she sat trancelike until her father returned and his ugliness banished her dreams until she was alone again.

Next morning as he sat drinking and complaining Grace thought about evening when he would be gone and her hour of joy returned to her.

Days passed and Da's face grew puffy and his eyes sank into fat. He never spoke of returning to work and amused himself by trying Grace with petty pranks. If she put cookies into the oven she never knew if when she took them out they wouldn't be charcoal blocks, Da having turned up the heat when she wasn't looking. He would break and crumble a new cake or scoop off the icing. Eat special desserts, pour salt in the gravy, flatten loaves of bread or drain water from the flowers. She couldn't watch him all the time and as she worked in another part of the house she prayed he would get drunk and pass out before doing any damage.

Her thoughts were full of the Warren family and it became a world she could escape to when she needed to still the wickedness that stirred in her heart as she faced another

of her father's treacheries. While he leered at her with his taunting grin she clutched her dreams and because of them was able to sit in church Sundays with a clear conscience and face the poem in her bible with equanimity.

"Won't you eat in the dining room with me?" Brandy asked one evening two weeks after that terrible Sunday's dinner.

"Oh no." Grace shook her head.

"Why not, Grace? Do."

But Grace shook her head again remaining adament. Their time together was too precious as it was to risk being tampered with and talk of the farmhouse, fields and beautiful Warren family were quickly becoming a world more real than Grace's own. She would not change the moments she looked forward to all day one iota.

"You should have seen that dog when he was a puppy, Grace, you'd never imagine the stupid things he did. Once my youngest brother lay on his stomach to drink from the stream in the wood and Lancelot took off after a rabbit. Well I guess he just figured Peter was there for his benefit because he landed with all four feet right on his head, jumped to the other bank, and kept running. Poor Peter's face was pushed into the pebbles at the bottom. Was he ever furious! He came up spluttering and raging, and all we could do was laugh."

Grace felt something strange bubble up in her throat

and as Brandy told more funny tales a laugh burst right out loud. Brandy seemed delighted to have caused it and Grace felt oddly light headed and free.

She stayed in this strange new mood until the home-coming of her father, noisy and shouting, from the pub. He was livelier than he had been for some time and his small eyes glittered. "Sit down, Graceless, listen to the ones I heard tonight!"

Word by word he drove every remnant of the newly born laughter from Grace's heart and anger and bitterness took its place. The old headache returned and crowded into her head pushing rhythmically at the walls of her skull.

After that night it was harder for Grace to stifle her bad feelings and instead of the farm she concentrated on Brandy to drive out the sound of her father's voice. Traced like a sculpture the long slender torso, lean muscles, level shoulders and proudly held head. Felt the softness of Brandy's skin and hair under her hands.

As days passed a feeling of ownership grew. Did she not feed and care for this lovely human animal just as Brandy did the young horse? Grace began to feel jealous of every moment the girl was out of sight; afraid she might get damaged or spoiled in some way and, weary as she was, she couldn't sleep until she knew Brandy was safe in her room eating the cookies and milk left by her bed.

CHAPTER VIII

The solid thud of the heavy door shutting behind her almost made Grace run back inside, then she saw Brandy disappearing into the dusk and again the compulsion to follow took hold of her. She scuttled from shadow to shadow always careful to make no sound.

It was while she had watched Brandy put on her sweater after the dishes were done that suddenly she found she couldn't bear to see her go and as soon as the girl's steps sounded on the path outside Grace dragged on her hat and coat to follow.

Now hidden by spring dusk she kept her eyes glued to the shape ahead and thanked God the street was empty of others. It was as though day snatched away its last whisker of light when they turned down Coppice Lane with its high hedges and trees that met and whispered overhead. Grace grew more frightened with every step and hoped Brandy would soon reach her destination. A flutter of wings made her mouth go dry and she stopped a moment to make sure the friendly sound of footsteps was still there.

All at once there was a splash of light, a burst of noise and then silence. Grace ran forward into a driveway that circled in front of a square two story whitewashed

building cloaked by ivy as high as the upper windows. A sign proclaimed "The Mill" and Grace hearing swirling water nearby remembered wading in the stream with other children on long ago hot summer days. There had been a big water-wheel then and sacks of flour in the yard. Now it was a pub and she realized she'd better stop standing in front of the door if she didn't want to be seen.

Hurridly she squeezed between bushes and the wall of the building working her way toward a window. The glass was yellow and wavy but through it she could see light and moving figures. She easily recognized the shape that was Brandy and saw it met by another; then she watched the two of them push through the crowd to the back of the room. Grace struggled along the wall getting scratched by bushes while ivy snagged her feet and pulled her hair. Light dusted from a window above her head and she stretched until her face was level with it.

"What kind of a day have you had Mike?"

Brandy sounded so close Grace jumped back, then realized she couldn't possibly be seen and stretched close again. How good it was to know Brandy was safe within reach! Grace let the beloved voice flow over her, not bothering to comprehend the words. The man Brandy called Mike had a soothing voice too and resting her chin on the sill Grace was lulled into a doze.

"We've got a right fine crop of pups this season. I

reckon we'll have one of the best packs in the country in a couple of years if only Master'll buy us good enough horses to keep up with them."

"You need something like my Kismet," said Brandy, "He's going to be a super hunter. Can't wait to try him. Hey Mike could you get me one of those cups of cockles from the tub up there?"

Michael left for a moment. "I wish you'd let me buy you dinner. If you'd only come out sooner ..." he said as he set two cups on the table. "I don't see why you have to eat at that wierd place where you live every night."

"Aw Mike. You'd understand if you met her. All the trouble she goes to for me. It'd break her heart if I didn't turn up."

"But she's strange ..."

"You'd be strange too if you'd led the life she has with that hateful old man. It's a wonder she's survived at all."

Grace yawned and brushed a moth from her hair watching it flutter against the window. She didn't like Brandy to sound annoyed. She should always be happy.

"From the way you describe it she hasn't really survived has she?"

At least Michael's voice sounds educated, Grace thought, not rough like Da's. Good, Brandy sounded quieter now.

"She's like no one I ever met before. Poor soul lives in a continuous state of panic. I hear him shouting at her

sometimes when he comes home late at night though she shuts all the doors so I won't. But the other evening she smiled. For the first time she gave me a real smile and a little laugh and do you know for a moment she looked beautiful. Those eyes ... You see why I must help her don't you Mike?"

"I think she's just another orphan colt for you to rescue but I understand. Just don't you get hurt . The situation gives me a spooky feeling somehow and I don't like it. Come on, beat you at darts!"

Grace shivered as they moved away to join others in the middle of the room and she tried to find a better place to see through. A clear diamond pane in a corner enabled her to watch the dart game and she was proud whenever Brandy gave a good throw, and silently clapped her hands.

She looked at the other people drinking, talking and laughing in air made fuzzy by smoke. A fire flamed high and horse brass shone from where they hung on the walls. Grace realized there was no one here at all like her father and with a lurch of joy she knew he had never heard Brandy talk, knew nothing about her away from the house. His talk was all lies.

The door at the far end of the room swung open, seemingly by itself and the fat brown dog, Doc, who lived at the "Queen's Head" at the top of the village paused and sniffed the air. After a moment he began to wind his way among the people, bowing and grinning as he collected alms of chips and pork pie.

Sometimes all Grace could see was his periscope of a tail above the table tops then for a while she lost him altogether. The door opened and closed again and she forgot him as Brandy scored a bullseye.

Something cold touched her ankle and Grace bent down to the warm dark shape at her feet and ruffled its ears. "Doc, Doc boy, my you did startle me!" How often she'd wanted to stop and talk to him as she'd rushed past the Inn on her way to church. Every sunday he'd been there waving his tail at her from his place on the doormat. It was nice to have him near now and she was sorry when he backed out of the bushes and she heard his toes clicking on the road. Time she should go too. It must be getting near the pub's closing hour and she wanted to be gone before then.

After a last long look at Brandy wavering behind the ancient window she pushed out of her refuge into the threatening spaciousness of the drive. When she reached the lane and its darkness she relaxed and as her eyes grew accustomed to it she saw Doc trotting on ahead. He stopped, pricked his ears, and eagerly leaped a ditch and wriggled through a hedge giving an excited yelp. Rabbits, thought Grace, hope he doesn't catch any. She saw a Hedgehog galumph across the road and it was as if she were the only human in the whole world. She gave herself up to the night, listening to its secret flutterings and cracklings. An owl hooted dreamily and she saw him silhouetted on the topmost branch of a tree;

saw his head turn to follow her with big hollows for eyes. Above him a universe of stars were like magnets trying to draw her up through velvet miles of night. In another instant she'd be free - if only she could loosen that last tie.

Screams of pain and fear shocked the silence. Grace gasped snapped back to earth. Again the cries came. Urgent. Desperate. Doc! Grace ran through a gate into a field following the sounds, stumbling into rabbit holes, wet grass slapping her legs. It seemed she'd never find him but at last she saw the dark smudge against the hedge and panting crouched beside it. Doc whimpered and snapped at his hind leg. Grace saw where the jaws of a trap bit in just below the hock.

"There, there," she soothed terrified lest she could do nothing for him. She gently touched his leg and his teeth slashed her wrist. "Stop it! Let me try." His cries became loud again and his panic spilled over into her so she wanted to run away with her hands over her ears. Instead she grasped the trap, not caring if he bit, and with all her strength tried to pry it open. "I can't do it. I can't." She was crying and the dog pulled to get away. With all her strength Grace wrestled the steel and suddenly the jaws gave just enough for Doc's leg to escape. Softly crying he ran into the night.

Grace lay on cool grass tears spilling into the sweet smelling earth. They seemed to flood from a bottomless pool as she wept for all the frightened intimidated creatures in

the world. Finally she was quiet as though asleep and passing wild creatures looked at her with bright inquisitive eyes.

When voices pierced her conciousness she thought they came from right beside her, then she realized they were from the other side of the hedge; customers going home from the pub. Chatter. A laugh. The sounds grew fainter and she was alone again. Stiffly she stood up, gained her bearings and walked back to the gate. It seemed a long way and when she reached it she hesitated afraid someone else might come along. She leaned against the rails listening intently. No human sounds at all. She slipped out and hobbled toward home as quickly as she could ready to hide at an instants notice.

Dark blood stains patterned her coat and her stockings hung torn and wet around her ankles. Her shoes made soggy sounds and she sniffed often having lost her handkerchief. When a shadow parted from the hedge and came toward her she hissed sharply through her teeth. "O Doc!" She sighed as he licked her hand then limped beside her until they reached the main street where he went left toward the Inn and she right toward the overgrown darkness at the other end of the village. She crossed from side to side avoiding cottage lights and when a door opened and a high voice called, "Kitty, Kitty," she crouched, heart thumping, under a hedge. A cat rushed past her . "There you are. Come on now." The door closed and Grace was able to go on.

She went slowly up the path to her own house. What if

Da's in the kitchen. He'll kill me for certain. Perhaps he's not back yet he's been getting later every night. Maybe he's in bed too drunk to notice I wasn't there. But her heart sank when she reached the back door and saw that the kitchen light was on. As she wondered what to do it went out and another shone through the stained glass window, then changed to the one in Brandy's room. Grace backed out into the garden and saw Brandy come to the window brushing her hair. Grace forgot her aches and the cold as she watched the glossy strands separate and slide across the brush smoothe and beautiful as swift water over rocks where the deer used to drink. Brandy left the window, the light went out and Grace pulled her coat closer.

She let herself into the house and crept to her room. Unbearably tired she washed quickly, her wrists stinging from the water, and fell into bed too weary to pull up the covers.

"Grace! Grace!"

Da! Bellowing at the top of his lungs from the kitchen. He'd wake Brandy! Grace pulling on her robe ran down to him barefoot. He leaned glassy-eyed on the table.

"Help me to my room, woman."

She put his arm across her shoulders and his weight made her hot and sick as she struggled upstairs close to fainting.

"Coffee." He mumbled from the bed.

Grace went back to the kitchen and filled the kettle.

As she waited for it to boil her fingers strayed through her coarse kinky hair. She pulled them away in disgust remembering the soft golden hair she had watched not long before. "Beautiful Brandy," she whispered and curling up in the big chair she fell asleep while the kettle boiled itself dry and the coals cooled and crumbled away.

CHAPTER IX

At 4 A.M. Grace awoke to the drumming of heavy rain. The fire refused to catch hold and she ached so much she didn't know where one pain began and the other ended. At last she coaxed warmth from the stove and after refilling the kettle she crept on cold feet upstairs to wash and dress, putting on her heaviest stockings to hide the scratches on her legs. She brought her raincoat down to the scullery and scrubbed the blood and grass stains out as best she could. Will I never get warm she wondered as she hovered over the steam of the kettle waiting for Brandy.

"Grace you don't look at all well!" Were the girl's first words but before Grace could answer her father called from his room. "You'd better go up," Brandy said, "I can manage fine."

Reluctantly Grace scrambled to answer her father's increasingly demanding shouts.

He told her he was going to stay in bed and by the time Grace had brought him water to wash with and straightened his blankets she knew Brandy had gone and she prepared his breakfast tray feeling cheated at not having said good-bye.

Filled with an aching weariness each trip upstairs

was misery and her father called with one demand after another. At last whiskey sent him to sleep and she took the chance to lie on her bed with a blanket pulled over her head. The peace was too short.

"Grace where's my lunch?"

And again she was running. She took him an omlette.

"What rubbish is this!" He dumped the egg onto the tray. "I want soup."

She brought him soup and he ignored it, drinking whiskey instead.

At six he left for the pub but weary as she was Grace couldn't relax. Brandy would soon be home for dinner and as she prepared shepherds pie her mind drifted back to the night before. She had been frightened but really there was nothing to fear and an episode like that with Doc wasn't likely to happen again. In fact, she told herself, she could follow Brandy whenever she wanted to after dark within walking distance - needn't sit at home every evening worrying about her. Grace felt slightly light headed and leaving dinner cooking went to the front window and smiled to see Brandy just leaving the stable yard for home. "I'll always be near," she whispered feeling her breath cool against the glass. "I'll protect you Brandy." Her head whirled and she closed her eyes waiting for one of the dizzy spells she had been having lately to leave. Then she returned to the kitchen.

It suprised her to have Brandy burst in almost immed-

iately. "Grace. Grace. I've got something for you." Rain glistened in her hair as she set something on the table with a heavy thump. "Come, open it."

Cautiously Grace approached, wiping her hands on her apron as she looked first at Brandy then at the package of woven hay with a daisy entwined on top.

"Open it." Brandy encouraged.

With shaking hands Grace removed the flower and put it on the table ready to be cared for later, then she pulled the sweet smelling hay apart. Inside was a rock of speckled breccia, rough on one side smooth on the other where it had broken away from a larger piece. She picked it up and turned it over - wondering.

"It's from the elephant! I rode up and got it today. I figured you couldn't go up there so he'd want to send some of his magic down to you."

Grace stared at the stone in her hand.

"I thought you'd like it. I'm off to wash now."

Grace barely heard her. A piece of the magic elephant! "Oh thank you. Thank you." she whispered. It felt strong and good in her hand and smelled of rich earth. She stroked the smooth part and held it against her cheek, then carefully set it on a shelf while she served Brandy's dinner. It stayed on her mind and her eyes strayed to it even while Brandy talked to her later. When at last she was alone, work finished, she clutched it to her and ran upstairs.

With her precious posession placed in the center of her bed Grace kneeled on the floor in front of it seeing in her mind the whole elephant crouching in his hollow as her mother had described it. She felt the winds of generations touch her cheek, saw people from her castle ride past and some run down to climb on its back and wish. Now she would wish, but was hers not too much for even the elephant? Grace could not bring the words to her lips but she thought them and then pressed her face to the rock.

"Please," she whispered, "Please."

Next day Tom Daly was really ill. Grace could tell that the moment she saw the gray face that looked belligerently at her from under the runkled sheet. She and Brandy had been watching a robin build a nest in the lilac bush outside the kitchen window and had laughed when he arrived with a long piece of velvet material. It fell every time he tried to weave it into the bits of twigs, string and fluff until obviously angry the bird left it flying like a pennant from a branch. Brandy had to leave for work then and the sound of her father coughing reminded Grace of the dismal day ahead and she'd plodded up to him with tea.

"You're gabbing with that girl too much."

The words sent a chill through her. "No Da. Just at mealtimes a tad."

"I want it stopped you hear? There's no need for you to talk to her. Laughing too. More'n like putting all sorts

of daft ideas in your head. Talks agin me I'll warrant eh? Eh?"

"No Da, no."

"He reared up in bed pointing a thick forefinger at her. "Don't let me catch you outside this house or I'll beat the bloody hide off'n you, you hear? I'll not have folk seeing you, laughing at me 'cause of you." He groaned and sank back shiny with sweat. "Stop staring, don't you see my bottle's empty." It crashed against the door frame as Grace scuttled from the room.

Her father's words panicked her. He couldn't know about the other night could he? She must obey him but she had to watch over Brandy whenever she could. She had to! Grace looked through the golden window on the landing and saw the girl as she had last seen her lit by the morning sun. The solution came to her . Hadn't Da said it was her being seen that bothered him? Well she would certainly see to that and feeling better Grace went on to the kitchen and pulled a bottle from the well stocked shelf. For once she looked on the liquor with gratitude for the money that paid for it was all that stopped Da from sending Brandy away.

When she returned to his room raucaus snores met her and as she set the bottle by his bed she looked into his face. "Things as ugly as he ought to be destroyed." The unbidden thought terrified her and she ran from his room to her own. She took the stone onto her lap and stroked it, forgetting the words that had frightened her, and her thoughts

wandered. "Dear elephant," she whispered, "Dear elephant, please ..."

"Grace. Grace you bitch, get in here!"

Grace jumped up. "Yes Da, I'm coming Da."

His appearance was horrible. Eyes glittering strangely from a face gone purple.

"Da are you all right?"

The room smelled horribly of liquor and unwashed body making her nose pinch tight.

"No I'm not all right. Pour me some ..." Weakly his arm waved toward the bottle.

"I don't think you should Da you're ill."

"Hell I'm bloody ill. Give me ..." He rolled to one side and vomited, then lying in it he started to moan. Gurgling ugly sounds.

He's dying, Grace thought, suddenly very calm. She watched as though from a great distance. I should get help. But the thought seemed unimportant and another rose in its place. Now's my chance. Let him die. Let him go.

His eyes opened and fastened on hers. Their expression changed to stark terror.

Gasping, Grace whirled away and ran to the stairs. She saw Brandy looking up from the dark well at the bottom and shouted. "Da's dying! A doctor!"

"Stay with him, I'll go." The floating face disappeared.

Grace sat on the top step hearing the door slam and feet running outside. She envisioned the strong legs taking Brandy fleetly up the street. How fine to be able to run like that.

Gagging coughs came from the room behind and she thought she heard him whisper for help but she couldn't go. The voices began to hone in on her. You hate him. Now's your chance. Tell the doctor you made a mistake. Make him go away. Do it, do it!

Weakly Grace tried to fight them but the words reached deeper than ever before and her will faded. She did hate him and she couldn't stop it. She'd tried so hard and she was weary. Wicked thoughts swooped like bats in the night but suddenly the vicar's voice scattered them. "Honor thy father. The vengeance of the Lord be upon thee."

Even he wasn't strong enough, the evil had secretly grown inside her and now it fought to burst out like a cancer and consume her. "Don't mind him. You can be free. Free to watch and look after Brandy always. To keep house just for her. Stop the doctor."

"No. No!" Grace grasped the newell post and pressed her forehead against the sharp corner until the voices were driven out by pain. She saw her mother's white arm reach for her, touch her shoulder...

"Come Grace, take me to him." It was the doctor who touched her.

She led him into the fetid room where she leaned against the wall, half faint, as he worked over the body on the bed. After a time he beckoned her to him. "It's a stroke he's had, though not too bad a one." Grace watched the doctor's lips spit the words like cherry pits toward her. "He'll live years with you looking after him. Keep him quiet in bed and give him his medicine. And definately no alchohol.

Grace nodded.

"You'll have to stay within sound of his voice at all times but that should be no problem for you eh?"

Grace's heart shrivelled like a walnut and for an instant her eyes flew to the window.

Together she and the doctor changed the bed clothes and as Tom Daly's head settled onto the fresh pillow his eyes opened and shot such a look of triumph toward Grace it made her gasp. His eyes closed and he slept.

"I'll be back periodically to check on him," Doctor said as she showed him out and she stood in the dark hall until a hand took her arm. "Come Grace, have a cup of tea." She went with Brandy to the kitchen and the hot liquid ran down her throat melting the lump inside her.

"Lucky I came home when I did," Brandy said refilling Grace's cup. "I had to get a scarf for my hair for cutting chaff this afternoon. How is he Grace?"

"I can't ever leave him. Must stay within hearing

always." She looked up at Brandy , hands writhing.

"But you never leave anyway and at least he'll be confined to his room."

She doesn't understand, Grace thought in despair. But then she doesn't know I follow her. I'll do it anyway. But he might die while I'm gone. "I will look after him, I will!" she burst out defiently.

"Of course you will Grace." Brandy looked suprised. Now drink your tea and don't worry. I've got to get back to work. Try to rest and I'll see you at dinnertime."

Grace sat at the table for a long while. Her head ached and was full of voices and strange pictures.

That evening Brandy stayed home and talked to her about her family and the young horse and Grace's head eased as she rested on Brandy's words. Later though when she cared for her father the tumult came tumbling back and she lay in bed for long hours sweating and afraid.

Every time she tended to her father lying there so helpless she was harried by temptation and the more she fought it the more upset she became until she couldn't allow herself a moments rest and worked frantically, polishing, scrubbing, mopping, until she was too tired to think at all. As though in rebellion her head throbbed constantly until sometimes she wanted to scream.

The pinnacle of her distress came the first night

Brandy said she was off to meet Michael at the pub. Grace watched her go hating the father who imprisoned her until she couldn't bear it and ran to her bible to read and think of her mother until she was in control again.

She cared for her father with a compulsiveness that became obsession. Time after time she struggled upstairs to see he was all right. She cooked him special foods and kept his room spotless, but she never allowed herself to stop and look at his face when he slept.

The moments Brandy talked to her were like a lull in a hurricane when Grace saw only the girl and heard only her voice. It was like floating on a cloud, breathing the sweet air of heaven.

"D-did you and Michael go to the film?" Grace asked one such evening.

"Yes, it was super too. We went on his motor bike to Epsley and the air was so warm and summery I could have ridden forever."

Grace's hands lay still on the silver she'd been polishing and she heard the roar of the motor and felt the young summer night rush past. "Wh-what did he wear?"

"Michael? Why his tweedy jacket - the rough one.

Grace felt it prickle her arms in front of her on the bike. "And the movie?"

"I loved it - made me cry and look a fool though."

"Tell me."

Grace relaxed completely involved in the story Brandy told. She smelt popcorn and felt Michael's arm on the rest beside her, got tears in her eyes at the sad ending and closely questioned Brandy about the rest of the evening.

"Gosh Grace, you wear me out with all your questions!" Brandy half laughed.

"Oh dear. I-I'm sorry ..." Grace went to the stove and shifted pans. "I'm sorry."

Brandy came over to her and stroked her arm. "I was joking, of course I love telling you everything. I am weary though and its a big day tomorrow."

"Why?" Grace was again full of questions.

"I'm taking Kismet across country for his first time. You should get to bed too Grace. You're getting much too thin you know."

"You're jumping Kismet? Where?"

"Well I planned a course starting in Mr. Shipley's north pasture, jumping his post and rails and on into ..." Brandy was away again .

Next day Da was able to speak ~~again~~ and asked for a cane with which to thump on the floor when he wanted to call Grace. The thumping harried her night and day and she started to hear it even when there had been no sound, arriving at his door to find him fast asleep.

Sunday came and for the first time she couldn't go to

church. She heard the bells as she cleaned Brandy's room and looking up at the hill tried to pray but instead of to God she found she prayed to a large stone elephant.

A week after his stroke Grace was awakened by her father's thumping six times during the night to go to the kitchen on a whim of his appetite. Each time she returned with what he ordered be cursed her for being slow, nibbled the food and tossed it aside.

"Get me whiskey." He growled once.

"I can't Da," she answered knowing that only fear instilled by the doctor stopped him from insisting.

When dawn arrived she could barely see for the pain in her head and though she tried to conceal it from Brandy over breakfast the girl remarked on how ill she looked.

"It's nothing," Grace replied but was glad when she could lie her head on the cool boards of the table until loud thumping called her upstairs again.

By mid-morning she could bear no more and half conscious she went into Brandy's room and flung herself heavily across the bed, face pressing into the spread. Pain battered her temples sending flashes of light to stab her closed eyes. Then suddenly it was all gone. As though she floated in space she lifted her head and gazed into the kindly face of Mrs. Bordon who looked out from the photo on the bedside table. Grace reached for the picture and brought it close looking intensely into the eyes. "Hi mother," she whispered. "I

"I wish I could come home, Mother, I need you so."

The eyes looked straight into hers; kindly, soothing. Grace began to replace the photo. She stopped. The hand she saw holding the frame was young, slender and tanned. She sat up and turned to the mirror on the wardrobe door and her heart leapt to see the golden girl who sat on the bed. Standing she felt her legs long and strong beneath her and felt her hair floating and gleaming about her head. She put the photo down and opening a drawer placed a pearl necklace about her own long graceful throat. Grace smiled a luxurious smile. After a moment she removed the pearls, returned them to their place, and with a small laugh of joy walked smoothly from the room.

CHAPTER X

She walked lightly past her father's door. He called and automatically she got him the handkerchief he requested and refused him the whiskey. Unnoticed curses followed her down the hall as she listened to the song of a mockingbird somewhere outside. On the landing she paused to look through the red frame of the window. Rosy globes decorated the apple tree and grass licked flames around its trunk. Grace laughed, tossed her hair and ran the rest of the way down and out into the sun. She held her face up to it, felt it burn through her lids and stretched out her arms. A laugh burbled from deep inside and she took a prancing step then ran from flower to flower; stroking the petals of a dahlia, lifting the face of a pansy, touching the brightness of a marigold. She sniffed a rose, yellow as lemon. Breathed and breathed its fragrance. In a shady corner a bee wriggled into a bluebell and Grace kneeled to watch, then followed the fluttering of a butterfly up one path and down the next.

A van stopped at the gate and Grace ran to meet the man who climbed out of it. "Good morning, isn't it a heavenly day! I'll take the milk."

Fred Snyder was astounded. He had delivered milk to Hislop House for the past twenty years and had never seen its mistress. Notes left in the tin box by the door had been their only communication. She certainly sounds normal, he thought trying not to show his curiosity, though she does look strange. Quite a freak really except for her eyes. What a waste! He handed her two cartons of milk. "It's good to see you about Miss."

"Everyone should be outside on a terrific day like this. Thank you."

Quite a lovely face really, he thought and said,"Good-bye Miss."

Grace turned away feeling the milk cold against her and carried it to leave beside the door. She wandered lazily through tangled bushes and long grass. "Poor garden," she said aloud, "You have been neglected but I'll look after you; trim you back, get rid of your weeds and mow you until you have the smoothest lawn in the village." She paused to survey the old house. Something was wrong. Suddenly she knew and ran inside dashing from from room to room snapping up shades and opening windows so summer tumbled in, warming dark corners and lighting old wood.

Humming she cut sandwiches and sliced rich red tomatoes in the kitchen watching her hands flow gracefully through their work. She continued to hum as she took lunch to her father and kept it up until she was downstairs again watching

rainbows scatter through dishwater.

A thought sent her smiling to the desk in the front room. Here she found some yellowed writing paper, a pen and half a bottle of ink. Carefully she dipped the nib and began to write.

Dear Mother,

I feel it must be time I wrote to you but as you know I am very busy here so I'll just sent this quick note to say how much I love you. I must run to catch the post but will write a proper letter soon.

Your loving daughter

Grace's pen hovered over the space left for a signature then stabbed a period. Decisively she folded the letter and popped it into an envelope which she carefully addressed to the farm in Dorset.

A few moments later she passed under the overflowing arch of roses into the street. Heat danced off the pavement, birds sang and chased each other and the breeze carried the scent of flowers from cottage gardens. Grace gave a skip and smiled at a woman in a window. She stroked a kitten that arched and purred around her legs and watched cloud shadows skid across the emerald shoulders of the hill. What fun to run up there with them she thought.

Voices hummed from the little school as she passed and she tried to make out what it was the children recited. A

bell reminded her she'd better hurry. It was hard to stay to a walk with all this exuberance inside her and she smiled to think that soon Mother, Father and her brothers and sisters would read the note she carried.

Screaming flapping crows fell and fought through breaking branches beside her. Grace jumped backward, heart racing, and her gaze followed the two black shapes up the gray wide street suddenly barren of sunlight. A wind whirled about her as she stood in the middle of it, cottage windows stared and a man came threateningly toward her on a bicycle. Whimpering she turned for home in a scrabbling hobble and as she passed the school wall she knew it was lined with the faces of silently watching children. A car swerved around her blaring its horn.

At last she slammed the house door shut behind her and leaned against it gasping in the dark hall. All her strength seemed gone and she felt lost and empty. She began to weep, small broken sounds for she knew not what and her hands tore the letter she held into tiny shreds that drifted to the floor.

Thump. Thump. Grace didn't know how long the sound had been beating on her subconscious and she rushed to her father's room.

"Where've you been? Hammered and called myself hoarse I have. Might've died. Not been out have you?"

"No Da." Slightly dizzy Grace couldn't remember where

she had been. "I was doing washing. I didn't hear."

"Well you'd better bloody hear in future."

Did he have to shout? Grace's headache started again.

"Get me a drink."

"Da you know the doctor ..."

"Damn the doctor. Get it!"

She stood not knowing what to do.

"Do I have to get it myself and wallop you on the way?" He flung his covers back, brandishing his cane.

Grace got the whiskey. Only a glass, though for a second she was tempted to take a whole bottle. Even a little might kill him the doctor had said. She'd be in trouble if Da died they'd blame her - but she was more afraid of him.

She watched him drink expecting to see a violent re-reaction and was half disappointed, half relieved when he grunted and went straight to sleep.

What was all this air and light in the house? She hadn't had time to notice till now and it was all very strange. From room to room she went shutting windows and pulling drapes till the house was dark and safe again. Then empty as a husk of wheat she went to the front room and polished and polished.

It wasn't till Brandy came home that life flowed back into her and she was overcome with a great longing to touch the girl, drinking in her presence like someone who had almost died of thirst. She kept her with her as long

as she could and when at last they parted it was as though a physical pain tore through her.

Light crept around the curtains when Grace awoke next morning and after quickly dressing she tiptoed along the passage to her father's door and put her eye to the keyhole. He stared back from the bed. Surely he couldn't see her and face burning she began to creep away.

"Grace."

With a sigh she turned back and opened the door.

"I called in the night."

"I'm sorry Da, I slept."

"You want me to die don't you? You'ld like that. But I'll not ... you stupid bitch ... I'll keep you busy for the rest of your days, else mebbe I'll send you away and get a proper nurse. Y'know I could do that don't ee?"

"Yes Da." Maybe he could; she didn't know."

"Leave me be. Go. Go."

Every nerve seemed stretched to quivering as Grace prepared breakfast and she listened and waited though she didn't know what for.

When Brandy arrived cheerful and fresh in faded jeans and blue shirt Grace wanted to hold onto her and never let her out of sight again.

Thump. Thump. Grace looked at the ceiling; oh no, not now!

Brandy looked up too. "You'd better go, he'll break the floor if you don't"

Oh why couldn't you have said to stay, thought Grace.

The thumping came again.

"I can pour my own tea. Don't look so sad Grace. I'll be back tonight with lots to tell you. I'm taking Kismet over to Mrs. Barnsley's to try him over her show jumps."

Grace put tea on a tray with toast and a dollop of jam and left the room. Fear swarmed in and she wanted to run back but slowly she plodded up to her father. He had managed to get to the bathroom so she set the tray down and waited. A door slammed downstairs and she ran to the window and saw Brandy going up the road - saw her wave to someone - heard her voice say good-morning.

"'Bout time." Da said as he fell back into bed and Grace put the tray on his lap. He paid no attention but sat watching her. "What rubbish is this you brung me? " His arm swept everything crashing onto the floor. Strawberry jam spread like gobs of blood and the teapot sent a scalding flood over Grace's ankles. The old enjoyment shone in his eyes and his laughter joined the pain and roaring in her ears.

"Worthless stupid bitch." The same old abuse, the awful noise. "You want to poison me with your garbage. Useless. Hobbling around with your yes Da, no Da, Christ! I dunno how I stands it."

The noise, oh the unbearable noise! And the voices

that cried like screaming gulls. "Soon he'll be strong again," they said, "You'll have lost your chance."

Grace kneeled over the mess on the floor and as the throbbing grew to be like a great drum beating in her head she clapped her hands over her ears.

Her father's feet appeared on the floor in front of her and she followed the skinny toad-belly legs to where they disappeared under his nightshirt. Then he dashed the stinking contents of his chamber pot over her head. She heard his laughter as he collapsed back on the bed.

Grace fled choking and sick to the bathroom. Shaking she stood under the shower and wished it could wear her away like a piece of soap. She would never be clean again and she stood there until hot turned to cold, then she crept to her room, teeth chattering, and put on clean dress and slippers. As she sat on the bed the voices poured in. "An overdose of his medicine, whiskey. They'd not suspect if you were clever."

Grace reached for the bible on her dresser and opened it . "Remember her who gave you this ..." then mother's voice, "He is your father ..." But the voices clamored louder,"She's gone, she'll never know." "Honor thy father," Boomed the vicar, "He'll know. God will know." With a great wail the voices drowned him "But he's evil, he should be killed."

"Oh help me!" Grace ran to the elephant rock on the window ledge and pressed her cheek to it. "Oh please elephant help me!"

The house was silent. Nothing moved anywhere. Grace hobbled on scalded feet to Brandy's room and sat on the edge of the unmade bed. Her headache faded to an echo behind a closed door. She turned to the photo on the table and her eyes dove pleading into the dark sympathetic ones of the mother. Like this she stayed. The trembling stopped and the chill left her.

Grace's eyes dropped to the hands lying smooth and slender in her lap. She stood and stretched, breathing deeply, then ran her fingers through her hair feeling it drift softly on her back.

What a terrific day she thought and went to the window smelling sweet honeysuckle in the breeze that touched her face. A small boy pedaled past on his bicycle and she waved to him then smiling and humming she made the bed, tidied the room and ran downstairs to make a large lunch. She was suprised at how hungry she was and ate until she couldn't manage another bite. Then she made a sandwich for the man.

What a filthy room, she thought as she gave it to him and wrinkling her nose got bucket and mop and started to clean ɣɣ up. How could anyone make such a disgusting mess? She steered her thoughts away from it to boys who fell off ponies as they practiced circus tricks and of laughter in a Dorset cottage.

Hearing movement downstairs Grace gathered her things

and went to see.

"Brandy! How come you're home now? Oh my gosh you're hurt!"

Brandy stood at the sink running water over her hand, water that ran red into the bowl. "It's nothing really, just messy. I snagged myself on a loose clint on Kismet's shoe. My fault not to have noticed it before, he might have hurt himself. You don't have a bandaid do you Grace?"

"Sure. You sit down a mo' and have a glass of milk while I fix you up." Grace rushed off to return with peroxide, cotton wool and bandaids. "C'mon hold out your hand."

Tenderly she cleaned and covered the wound. "There that should fix it. What's the matter?" Brandy was looking at her strangely.

"Nothing. You just seem different. Do you feel all right?"

"I never felt better! Isn't this the most perfect day in the world?" Grace twirled in a circle. "C'mon I'll walk with you to the gate."

Together they went outside and warmth soaked into them as far away a wistful cuckoo called. Bees and insects buzzed and hummed and birds darted through the tangled garden. Grace looked around. "I've got to get to work here. Whatever have these people been thinking of to let such loveliness run wild. It's hard to know where to start."

At the gate Brandy looked hard at Grace. "You're sure

you're O.K.? How's your headache?"

"Headache? I don't feel as though I could ever have one of those. Hey what is this - you're the one who's wounded!" Grace squeezed Brandy's arm and laughed, "We'd better both get back to work or we'll be sacked."

Brandy smiled and left, looking back twice before disappearing with a wave into the farm. Grace stayed a moment under the roses, pushing her nose into petals soft as fawns breath, soaking in the crimsons and pinks. She picked one and brushed it beneath her chin as she looked up at the house. Handsome it was but how very blind! No need for that and she ran inside, hustling from room to room letting daylight in. "There Mr Daly isn't that better?" she burbled as the staleness was chased from his surroundings and she didn't hear his curses.

She sang as she cleaned and polished windows. She filled each room with bowls of flowers and soon the house smelled like the richest rose bower.

At noon she took soup to the man, smiled politely and ignored his words. A short while later she sat beneath the apple tree in speckled shade crunching a crisp juicy apple. She felt so good and drowsily content she stretched out on the grass.

The click of the gate made her sit up and she saw the mailman hesitantly approaching. "Hello!" she called and laughed to see him jump and look as though he wanted to run away. Probably not used to seeing young ladies asleep in

his path she thought. "It's O.K. its only me." Seeing a letter in his hand she jumped up and ran toward him.

Joe Tippen looked away, embarrassed to watch her hobbling progress. Hard to believe this dwarfed, oddly shaped woman was the little girl he had gone to school with. They'd been friends once, then he'd forgotten her, sharing with others jokes about the haunted house and telling his children the song he had made up about her when she'd first come to school. He blushed to think of it and wondered if she remembered him. "It's good to see you Grace."

"What's you're name? I don't believe we've met." Her violet eyes studied him gravely.

"Joe Tippen. We went to school together."

"You're from Dorset too? I'm sorry I don't remember you. Is that letter for me?" She took it from him, looked at the envelope and pressed it to her cheek smiling. "It's from home. Thank you."

Confused Joe backed out the gate and was glad to climb onto his bike. Perhaps he should mention it to the doctor but chatting to Miss Lightly at the next stop drove Grace right out of his mind.

"My dear daughter." Grace read the letter as she leaned against the tree trunk and didn't get farther than those first three words for some time. "My dear daughter," she whispered. "It is such a lovely day and the lambs are frisking in the field

playing king of the castle on the mound near the water trough so it's hard not to spend all my time watching them. Your father has gone to the village on some errands as soon he'll be tied down with hay making. It lookes like a good crop this year and your brothers and sisters want to stay home and help but I say school is more important and hired help less expensive than education lost. Jenny is ...

Grace concentrated on every word to the Much Love, Mother. Here she lingered and gazed dreamily into space. How happy she was! A breeze ruffled the paper in her hand and regretfully she replaced it in its envelope and went inside where she carefully glued it shut and put it beside Brandy's bed.

Thumping broke the peace. Silly man, let him wait. She went to her room, turned the mirror that stood on top of her dresser toward the wall and, looking into its back, smilingly brushed her hair.

That night she ate in the dining room with Brandy. She heard all about how well the young horse had gone that day and became as excited as Brandy about his prospects as a hunter and show jumper. She drew each moment of Brandy's day from her, feeling the reins in her hands and the strong lurch of the horse under her as they jumped a hedge. Grace saw Gilbert, the groom's weathered face as she listened to something funny he'd said and they discussed the other horses. But always they came back to Kismet and Grace felt love for the animal Brandy trained.

"Gosh I must run, I'm meeting Mike at eight!"

Grace didn't mind Brandy's leaving, she was already composing the letter she soon wrote seated at the desk among the gleaming antiques.

Dear Mother,

Today I jumped Kismet over the hedge in the back pasture. I wish you could have seen him he's really some horse. Gilbert told such a funny story ...

For two pages she wrote and finished with; tonight I am going out with Mike. Your loving daughter.

Grace tucked the letter into a neatly addressed envelope and slid it into a small hidden drawer in the bottom of the desk.

It was dark now and she was comfortably tired and ready for bed. After seeing the man needed nothing she went to Brandy's room and perched on the window sill looking up at the protective silhouette of the hill. She wondered if perhaps Brandy and Michael walked up there hearing the same night sounds she heard. Owls hooting, a rabbit's squeal, excited yapping ...

"Is that a fox?"

"I think so, there're a lot about this year." Michael leaned back against the gate they had just passed through, his arm across Brandy's shoulders. "Farmers will soon be complaining."

They stood silent, listening, hearing more all the time; a dog's bark, a bird, a child's wail and the clickety clack of a train far down the valley. Lights from the village were like fire-flies and Brandy sought out Hislop House.

"How's your landlady doing?" Mike read her mind.

"Just great - I guess. At least today she's changed completely. Suddenly she's not shy anymore and her voice is different. She's skipping about like a young colt."

"She hardly spoke at all before did she?"

"Not much. Now she's just full of questions about everything I do all day. Not just about home like before. By the time I left tonight I felt like a squeezed sponge."

"Guess you won her confidence. That's what you wanted isn't it? How's the old man?"

"Now thats a wierd thing. I hear him cussing her when she's with him yet when she comes down she's calm as could be, smiling as though she hadn't heard a thing. She used to look all panicky and flustered. It's almost as though she's a different person. I'm really fond of the little thing you know. Feel almost as though I'd known her forever."

Mike drew Brandy's head against his shoulder. "I think you should move. The whole business sounds unnatural to me. Move in with me Brandy."

"Then I'd really be in trouble." She pulled a strand of the hair that almost hid his eyes. "Anyway I can't leave her. She needs me and it's nice to feel important even if

it is just one crazy little lady."

"I need you more." Mike's mouth covered hers and Brandy forgot the house where at that moment Grace was opening the door of her wardrobe and taking certain of Brandy's clothes down from their hangers.

CHAPTER XI

She dressed in darkness with only slivers of a young moon's light to see by. She pulled on faded jeans, the horsy smelling black turtle neck sweater and flounced her hair free. After tying a blue and white scarf around her neck she inspected the faint dark shape in the mirror and sighed with pleasure. "Oh you do look fine!" she whispered.

Leaving the mirror Grace danced across the room and leaned with her elbows on the window sill, chin on her clasped hands. The moon slid in and out behind puffs of cloud. "How beautiful you are Mr. Moon. You are a love, always faithfully following your routine so I always know you're there for me to talk to. Tonight I'm so happy, so lucky to be me but even so there's something way deep inside, like a tiny moth of fear. I don't know why dear moon. It's as if I'm standing on the edge of a cliff that might crumble and if it does I know I'll fall and fall forever. Please don't let it happen."

The night listened and a cloud covered the moon not letting it peek out again. Grace shivered and drew back into the room, forgetting the ghost that had touched her, filled again with joy that made her prance and whirl across the oak floor. Laughing she flung herself across the bed then slowly

removed the clothes and hung them exactly as she had found them.

Summer was really here with its fields baled into new hay and the cuckoos call losing its innocence. Grace couldn't bear to spend any more time indoors than she had to and rushed through her chores so she could be out trimming hedges or weeding the flower beds lost in earth smells and insect sounds. She found an old lawn mower in the shed and cut the grass leaving each swath an exciting smoothness behind her. Every evening she looked over her work with pride and couldn't wait to show it to Brandy.

One day as she trimmed the back hedge she paused to look into the field beyond. In a moment she had put down her clippers and pushed through the rusty gate to the buttercup and daisy studded turf where sweet faced jersey cows lifted their heads to look at her. "Hello ladies," Grace said softly going toward them, wanting to stroke the smooth shine on their necks, but when she got close they blew through broad wet muzzles and ducked away to begin eating again tongues curling out for tussocks of grass and tails swatting flanks.

She watched them for a while before going back to make Brandy's dinner - and the old man's - but tomorrow, she told herself, she'd return for certain.

At first she was going to tell Brandy about her adventure, then she decided against it. Her wanderings would be her own

secret.

Next afternoon she did go farther, this time with her pockets full of apples which she fed to a bristly maned grey cob she met two fields away. When she left him a dog came snuffling through a hole in the hedge. "Doc!" she cried and laughed as he looked up in comical suprise, a strand of grass balancing across his nose. Wagging from tail to front legs he came up to her and they continued together, exploring rabbit holes, finding bird nests and sniffing flowers.

Next afternoon when Grace left the house Doc was outside waiting for her and so it was every day after that.

Though they went a little farther each time Grace was always home by four-thirty to feed and care for the man. After all, she told herself, that's my job. And though the house remained spotlessly clean the strong scent of polish faded from the air of the sitting room.

One afternoon when she collected Tom Daly's tray after lunch he grasped the sleeve of her dress. "Grace what ... Get me some whiskey woman will ee?"

Calmly Grace twisted free and left thinking of the field where the men were haying. She'd seen them there yesterday and planned to watch them through the hedge today.

Tom heaved himself up in bed so he could see out the window and watched her go, angry and puzzled. Something about her half frightened him. He could make no impression on her whatever he said. However loud he cursed her she seemed not

to hear and surely the frustration of it, and having no whiskey, was what kept him weak as he was. "'Tis as though I'm bloody invisible," he muttered. Somehow he must get liquor, his craving body demanded it. Suddenly he whacked the mattress with his hand. "I'll get it myself, damn it!" The simple solution churned him into action and he struggled his legs from under the covers, stood up and started along the hall. When the stairs dropped away from in front of him he stopped. "Break my bloody neck," he growled and miserably went back to bed where he lay deep in thought.

When he heard Brandy later he called and asked her to post a business letter for him. As she took it he grinned. Snotty bitch, she'd be suprised if she knew what it was and that Grace, her absences were about to come in right handy. Old Tom wasn't done yet, oh no. Soon he'd have all the booze he wanted and someone to talk to.

In a few days he had a bottle hidden under his pillow and if Grace noticed the smell of whiskey she said nothing.

It was Sunday morning. Everything was done. The man cared for and Brandy at the stables. Grace looked through the window at the hill soft and misty with morning light. "That's where I'll go!" she said and immediately put on her shoes and set off up the street. There were many people out, leaving their cottages and heading toward the church and Grace smiled and said "Good morning" whenever she met anyone's

eye. It was disappointing that few answered and some seemed to avoid her but she decided they were just too busy with their own thoughts and whistled to Doc who dozed on the Inn's doormat. He scampered to her overjoyed at the unexpected invitation and together they turned up the lane. It was quiet and Grace looked back to see where all the other people had gone. A cluster stood by the churchyard gate and watched her. She waved cheerily and forgot them.

The hedge on one side was green, fresh and alive with birds and on the other a wall hugged the sun to it making the little road warm and private. Gates led into lazy sunday farmyards and Grace heard the rattle of dairy utensils being washed and the clank of stantions as cows were released after milking. Good smells drifted warmly and chickens scratched and clucked.

Pavement ended changing to grassy track. Grace climbed a stile and ahead the path grew steep, twisting upward through fields and woods. Small groups of cattle grazed, and chewed, and stared and two horses lay flat, soaking in the sun. Doc soon grew tired of chasing uncatchable rabbits and panted close to Grace's heels, tongue almost touching the ground. They stopped at a cattle trough and while Grace pushed the float down to drink running water Doc lapped noisily with his front feet on the metal edge.

The way grew rougher now, bordered by bracken and hawthorn misted with bluebells in between. Grace knelt, filling her arms

with blue coolness but she knew if she picked them the flowers would be limp by the time she got home so she left all but two whose stems she pushed through a button hole of her blouse.

She was glad when the path leveled to wander in the shade of a wood, then suddenly the sweeping brow of the hill stretched before her and she began to run. A lark soared into the sky with all the joy of space in its song and sheep scattered in front of her then turned to watch while overgrown lambs butted greedily beneath them. Grace felt to be running very fast, the wind clean in her throat and fresh on her face, the turf thick and soft urging her on. When she reached the tower she sank down laughing and hugging the puffed Doc. "Isn't this heaven Doc? Look you can see the end of the world!" Below stretched the Vale with its dark and light patches of fields and orchards, villages, glinting sleek rivers and far distant purple hills.

Whispers of church bells rode the wind, grew loud, then soft again as villages called one to another. A faraway cow bawled and always there was the gentle ripple of bleating sheep. Grace wanted to swallow it all, keep the whole day safe inside her forever.

Relaxed against the warm limestone of the tower she looked down at Linlea with its toy thatched cottages and ant-sized cattle. A few specks straggled along the street. "No-one even knows I'm watching!" Grace whispered to Doc and squeezed him so hard he decided to leave her and go exploring.

Grace leaned forward seeing something circling in a tiny square field. Surely it was Brandy lunging one of the horses. She held her breath and watched intently.

Brandy had also seen Grace. Her eye had first caught the strange figure some time before as it cavorted awkwardly along the brow of the hill. For a moment she'd thought it some animal then realized it was her landlady. Whatever is she doing up there? she thought, amazed she was capable of such a climb. Brandy felt a prickly feeling up the nape of her neck as she watched. She'd been feeling something strange about Grace lately, hearing a voice and words that seemed to mimic her own when the little woman spoke. Even the movements, so grotesque done by Grace, seemed too familiar. Brandy had told herself she was being silly but she had begun to lock her door at night anyway. She cracked her whip to keep the mare trotting around her. Like a bird with a broken wing, she thought, it's mended and now I'm afraid of it.

A gate clicked, startling the horse and breaking Brandy's reverie. Cows meandered into the field followed by Harry the cowman. "Whoa, Gambol." The gray mare came in to her and nuzzled her palm. "That's all for today. How you doing, Harry?"

"Grand day, isn't it Miss. What were you watching?"

"I just thought I saw Miss. Daly up there."

The man pulled the neb of his cap down and squinted his eyes toward the top of the hill. "Aye, there's summat up there

all right, agin the folly. Could well be the Daly woman, she's been seen about lately. Proper strange she be."

"Does she talk to people?"

"Oh no, Miss. Everyone's affrighted of her. Say she's posessed they do. They stays clear of her all right."

Brandy was suddenly angry. "What foolishness Harry! You must be about her age. Didn't you know her at school? Did you all just desert her when her mother died?"

"Not really, Miss, Tom chased everyone away and he's a bad'un to cross. Teacher tried to see her but t'weren't no good. 'Sides it wasn't no one's business and she turned peculiar, never coming out but to church and then ignoring us. Went 'round the bend I reckon. Best left alone that sort." Harry looked at his watch. " 'Most lunch time though I doubt you'll have much waiting you today. Wouldn't catch me living in that house. You take care Miss. I wouldn't want something should happen to you."

Brandy watched him go back toward the barn and began to follow, one hand on the mare's neck. "Stupid villagers," she muttered, "Well I darn well won't desert her." All the old protective feelings flooded back and she gave a last look at the hill just as the solitary little figure disappeared. For some reason Brandy felt like crying.

Grace hadn't noticed when Doc left her side and only turned away from the distant dots when she heard his excited

yelping. She followed the sound to the edge of a hollow whose grassy sides sloped to form a bowl. At the bottom rested a huge rock shaped by nature into the form of a crouching elephant. With a cry of recognition Grace slid down to it and hugged the rugged trunk, pressing her cheek hard against it. "Oh Elephant! Dear dear Elephant!" After a few moments she walked around him patting and stroking his roughness before climbing onto his wide shoulders. She whispered into the ears folded back to her, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." The words wouldn't stop though she didn't know what she thanked him for.

Doc whined from the ground below. The sun was directly overhead. Brandy and the man would soon want dinner. Reluctantly Grace got down. "I'll be back," she whispered to the shadowy elephant eye and after a last hug she left the hollow with its quiet stillness to stand again in the boisterous wind beside the tower.

All at once her eyes fixed on something alien and strangely out of place. About half a mile away widely spaced pylons stretched high tension wires up one side of the hill and down the other. Metallic skeleton giants, they sent a trickle of cold fear into Grace's soul and she turned quickly away calling Doc to hurry. She took care not to see them again.

It was easy going down and Grace went wrapped in dreams as airy as the tufts of thistledown that floated past her. Doc trotted close behind. When they reached the lane the farms

were quiet with sleep and after Doc left her at the Inn Grace's footsteps were the only sounds echoing between the walls of the cottages. The gate to the churchyard was open and as Grace looked up the narrow path the rumble of organ music startled her. Involuntarily she shuddered and ran until the sound was left far behind in the soughing of the elms.

The rasp of drunken snores met her as soon as she entered the house and she went straight to the man's room. She ignored the inert lump in the bed and went toward the bottle on the floor underneath. She stopped. Went forward. Stopped again. Brandy came in downstairs. Grace looked at the half full bottle, turned on her heel and left the room shutting the door carefully behind her.

Dinner didn't take long to prepare, she'd had everything ready for the stove before she'd left and Brandy helped her. The girl insisted on taking the man's tray up to him. "You must be tired, Grace, it's a long walk to the top of the hill."

"How do you know where I was?" Grace asked.

"I saw you from the field. I bet it was beautiful up there. Now come on, let me take the tray."

Grace couldn't stop her. She listened to the footsteps going up, heard the door open, and after a few moments close again. Footsteps hastily returning.

"Grace did you know he's got a bottle? Didn't the doctor

say he mustn't - it might cause another stroke?"

Grace shrugged. "He knows. If he wants to drink himself to death that's his choice, I shan't stop him."

"But Grace ..."

"I didn't give it to him."

Brandy looked at her, frowning, then with a small shake of her head took the bowl of soup handed her.

Dinner being both late and good both women ate hungrily. Over coffee Grace asked questions about Brandy's morning, careful to avoid any reference to her own. She wouldn't have minded talking about it but for some reason she didn't want to mention the elephant. That was a very private thing and somehow she knew that any talk of the hill must lead to him.

She was almost glad when Brandy said she had to hurry to meet Michael for an afternoon drive in the hunt pick-up he had managed to borrow but just before they parted a strident ringing came from the front doorbell.

"Whoever could that be?" Grace wondered.

"D'you want me to answer it?"

"No thanks, I'll go." Grace thought it peculiar that Brandy should look so suprised but at that moment the bell rang again and she went to see who it was.

A tall thin man in a clerical collar faced her. "Good morning Grace. Could I come in and talk to you for a moment?"

"Good morning. Why yes of course vicar." Grace led the way into the sitting room where she waved him to a chair

and sat stiffly on one opposite. She didn't like this man. Didn't like the mothball smell of him nor the way his throat pleated over his collar. She looked at the hair in his nostrils and wished he'd go away.

The only sound in the room was the tapping of his bony white fingers on the chair arm.

"Ahem." Now Reverand Soames faced her he didn't know what to say. This strange little creature had always unnerved him, staring with glittering fanatical eyes as he read the sermon every sunday through all those years. To be honest he'd found it quite restful not to have her in church these past weeks but as his wife said "she is one of the flock and you mustn't let her stray." So he had come. "Well Grace, we've missed you these past sundays." He tried to smile but his lips stuck on his dry teeth. "I wondered why you haven't been to church?" He wished she'd stop staring like that.

Suddenly Grace's expression relaxed. "Church? Oh we're not too strong on church in my family."

The vicar blinked. Was she joking?

"You see we're always too busy with the animals so we just attend on special occasions. Father says God will understand."

Tom said that? What animals? The vicar looked around as though expecting to see them. He brushed a hand across his forehead. "You should make time you know Grace. Your mother..."

"Oh mother agrees completely with dad. Mind when all

of us do go it's quite an outing. We dress in our best and walk through the village greeting friends, we know most everyone. Our church is small and friendly and we all love our vicar. He speaks gently of lost lambs and how Jesus looks after the smallest of hurt things so you feel really good and happy to be alive."

Grace gazed into space and the vicar could do nothing but listen.

"We sing hymns that have lovely happy tunes and sometimes colors from the stained glass windows dance across the altar or the sun glints on the eagle that holds the bible or sends a ray to the font we were all christened in. When we leave Reverand Breamly shakes our hands and talks to each of us asking questions as though he really cares, and I'm sure he does. It's a lovely place, our church. I really don't want to go to any other."

Grace's eyes had been looking out the window but now the confused vicar felt the intense burning of them on himself. He didn't know what to say and he felt strangely guilty and envious of that other vicar. Should he have done more than just see Grace from the pulpit all these years? Shut in with her drunken father had noone ever visited her? Surely she was quite mad, but what had he ever done ... "How is your father, Grace?" He said eventually.

"Very well thank you." She smiled fondly.

Could it be she did feel affectionately toward Tom

Daly? Perhaps he was different at home. Suddenly he was more sure of his ground. "I heard he was drinking again. You mustn't let him you know."

Grace laughed. "My father? He hardly ever drinks. Says life is too much fun to waste on that stuff." She leaned forward conspiritorily. "There are some in this village though who do. I've heard tell that one man beat his wife so badly when he was drunk that she died." She put a hand to her mouth and a frightened look flashed across her face. "I don't know where I heard that. Do you know? I feel I should remember ..." Her voice rose and her eyes searched his.

"No, no. It was a story I expect." Quickly the vicar sought to calm her and he realized his shirt stuck to his back. "I must go."

Grace jumped up smiling politely. Tension left the room and the vicar wondered if he'd imagined things as he followed her to the door. Once outside he turned and took her hand. Her face was calm. Was it too calm? "Good-bye Grace. Give Tom my best wishes and look after him well. Remember he is your father."

The words roared in Grace's head, repeating themselves until she felt she teetered on the edge of a terrible precipice. Slamming the door she ran through the house and up to Brandy's room where she flung herself across the bed and snatched the photograph from the bed table. Mrs. Warren's smiling eyes

soothed her and the fear melted until she remembered only the dear little Dorset church and drifted into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XII

Grace was now well acquainted with the surrounding countryside. She knew which animals grazed which fields and what stage each crop had reached, recognizing every change brought on by weather or time. She had a favorite place on the side of the hill where she could sit hidden by ferns to look down on the activities of men and animals but she always cut through fields to get there avoiding the village and its church.

One afternoon she saw a string of brightly colored vehicles moving slowly along a road and she watched fascinated as they turned into a field. Gypsies! She had heard mention of their coming each year to help with the harvest but she had never seen them. She watched the caravans spread out, saw figures appear, unharness horses and tether them, saw smoke surge from metal chimneys. It was like a fairy tale and it drew Grace closer, always careful not to be seen, to watch the dark skinned men, women and children. Usually people held little interest for her but these were different. Lusty and carefree they talked and laughed among themselves.

After a week of watching she felt she knew them personally: the old man who was obviously leader and his scarred

bull terrier, the younger men who worked in the orchards picking fruit as they joked and laughed, sometimes singing to transister radios, the long-haired woman always surrounded by children and the other women who scrubbed laundry in the stream. Grace often wished she could make herself known to them but being of a different race she was afraid they wouldn't accept her and besides the many dogs would be sure to attack Doc if he strayed onto what they now thought of as their property.

As she and Doc wandered farther up the stream one day they entered a small wood and came across a young gypsy boy who sat on a willow root fishing. He made as if to pull in his line and run away.

"No don't leave," Grace said, " I won't hurt you." She sat where she was , her hand on Doc's head. "I'ld like to watch you fish."

The boy looked at her for a moment then cast his line. They sat in silence watching where it had sunk and the water giggled among stones at the stream's edge. It was half an hour before the line jerked and excitedly the boy began to reel in the trout that came curling and lashing from the water.

He held it up to Grace, shyness forgotten cheeks flushed. "He's a whopper isn't he!"

Grace went closer to inspect. "He sure is. Your mum will be pleased."

"Aye." the boy said and dropped it in a bucket. He threw out the line again and again they waited. Another fish

took the hook and when it was safely with the first Grace took an apple from her pocket and offered it to her companion who ate it ravenously. She gave him another and he ate that also down to the last seed. "Didn't you have any lunch?" she asked.

"Naw, I don't eat lunch."

Grace studied him during the next wait. He was very thin. About nine she guessed and in need of a good wash but his eyes were as bright as deep-water pools and alert. When she turned away she felt him studying her. When their eyes met she knew they were friends.

"Don't you have to go to school?" she asked.

"Naw, I'm a gypsy." He stuck his chest out proudly. "I don't have to do nothing."

"Tell me about being a gypsy. It must be fun living in one of those lovely caravans."

"It's pretty O.K. I guess but it was better before ol' Drummer died. He was the best horse of them all and he was my friend before the accident killed him.

"What happened?"

"A truck hit us on our way from up North. Drummer and me was all as got hurt cuz I was riding him. Hey look - there's another!"

They watched the shadow hesitate in the water then there was a tug and soon a third trout circled the bucket.

The boy told of other fishing adventures. He seemed happy to have someone to talk to and Grace wondered why he

wasn't playing with the other boys who ran and wrestled about the camp. Some his age even went to work.

They laughed and talked like old friends and Doc sat between them wagging his tail as either one's hand idly stroked his back.

A distant bell clanged. "I got to go," the boy said gathering his things. "Will you be here tomorrow?" He stood waiting for her reply.

"I will, I will," Grace promised joyfully.

He grinned and ran off through the trees. Grace watched him go in mounting horror, the sun draining from her day. She could see nothing but the crooked leg the boy dragged after him and the black terror started to grow.

"Come Doc, come!" Wrenching herself away she ran until the fear left her and the boy was driven from her mind as though he'd never been.

Doc chased a hare and Grace talked to the old grey cob and watched calves play in the paddock behind Grange Farm. When she reached home she had to hustle to get dinner ready and then she made herself tidy the man's bedroom, ignoring his remarks and sly glances. She knew he had a bottle hidden under his pillow, maybe two, but she pretended she didn't.

When Brandy came home she was full of the brilliant jumping Kismet had done that afternoon. "First time over a wall and a triple and he didn't think of stopping," she exclaimed proudly and Grace, just as proud, asked for descrip-

tion of his every move and wrote it all in a letter home afterwards.

The next two days Grace worked in the garden digging a patch of ground that took all her energy. Doc gave up waiting at the gate and went rabbiting on his own. When she did go out again Grace stayed far away from the gypsies and it was with relief that one day she saw the field bare when she looked down from the hill: nothing left when she walked in it later but crushed grass, ashes from their fires and a string of broken beads. She stood in the center of the camp remembering the laughter and the noise and wished she could have been a part of it.

"Brandy? Brandy it's me." Grace had listened outside Brandy's door wondering at the sounds of drawers opening and shutting until finally her curiosity had to be satisfied and she'd knocked.

The door opened. "Come on in Grace. How do I look?" Brandy swirled the skirt of the brown and white cotton dress she wore. "What do you think? I bought it yesterday."

"Terrific!" Grace had never seen Brandy in a dress before. "You do, you look really fantastic!" She sat on the edge of the bed as Brandy preened and turned. Her hair shone like the coat of a healthy animal and Grace was proud of her.

Brandy laughed. "Now I didn't ask for compliments - will Mum and Dad like it, that's the point."

"When will they see it?" For the first time Grace saw the reason for all the other clothes piled on the bed. "You're going away?" She could hardly get the words out.

"Only home for ten days and not till next month. August eighth . Now don't look so sad Grace. Think of the rest you'll have without me to look after."

A cold hand seemed to hold Grace's heart from beating.

"I'll have so much to tell you when I get back ... come on help me choose what to take. I thought I'd travel in this pant suit but what scarf goes with it?"

Grace searched through the pile and pulled out a kerchief almost the color of Brandy's hair. "This would be nice."

"Perfect. Now what shoes?"

Both of them sorted and searched until soon Grace felt as if she were preparing for her own trip home and they chattered like a couple of schoolgirls.

"I sure hate to leave Kismet so close to his first show but its the only time I could get. I won't be able to get away during hunting season for sure. Shall I take this blouse?"

"You have all these others." Grace wanted to make sure the wardrobe wasn't left too empty. "You'll miss Michael too won't you?"

"Yes I will."

Grace looked at her awakening to a new thought. "Do you love him Brandy?"

"Why ... I guess I do. But think how super it'll be to see my family again. It feels like years."

The sudden blush faded from Brandy's cheeks but Grace dwelt on this new aspect of her friend's life. She hadn't paid much attention to Michael and from that day she began to think about him more.

The upcoming trip was the main topic of all their conversations now and Grace lived in vicarious anticipation.

"What's all this babble I hear in the evenings," Tom asked one day.

"Just planning the vacation and what we'll do in Dorset."

"What vacation? You're not going on any bloody vacation!"

Grace hummed and ignored him.

"You hear me? You're not going anywhere!"

Grace watched a sparrow on a branch outside the window.

"Stupid barmy bitch. Daft as a bedbug you are." He dragged a bottle from under his pillow and blatantly took a swig. "I don't need you to get me booze. You see I can look after meself. Soon I'll be up and able to whip you into shape, show who's boss around here. You'll regret the way you've treated me. I'll show you." This last was shouted at the closed door as Grace went down the hall still humming and wondering if the blackberries would be ripe in Dorset.

It was the last tuesday before the vacation and Brandy

was showing Grace a skirt she'd bought the evening before.

"It's lovely," said Grace stroking the material.

"Grace why don't you get yourself a new dress?" Brandy spoke more quickly as the idea caught hold. "You could take the nine-thirty bus into Valesworth tomorrow and I'll draw a map on how to find my favorite dress shop. You must go! I bet you haven't bought anything new in years."

Grace's thoughts spun. She did need clothes for the trip. She must look nice to see mother. "O.K. I will go!"

"Have you enough money?"

"Will fifty pounds be enough?"

"Oh gosh yes. You won't need half that I hope!"

Grace thought of the cash in the bottom drawer in Tom Daly's room. Since his illness the monthly envelope sent by the solicitor contained notes instead of a money order. It was addressed to her but as always she put it in the man's drawer and one had come yesterday. "Yes, I've got the money," she said.

"Good. Now listen carefully while I tell you how to get there..."

Next morning Grace waited among the huddle of women at the busstop outside the Queen's Head. All but she carried roomy baskets and were eager to get to market while the produce was fresh. Brandy would never have suggested Grace go today had she remembered it was marketday but now Grace stood with the map to the dress shop tucked into the handbag Brandy had

loaned her and smiled whenever a glance slid her way.

She saw Doc sitting in the Inn doorway and for a moment wished she were taking him for a walk, then anticipation claimed her and she imagined how fine she'd look in her new dress when she tried it on tonight.

A red bus roared and rocked toward them, squeaking to a stop and clunking its doors open simultaneously. Grace was washed onto it by the wave of women and flung into a seat as the vehicle lurched foreward. She scooted over by the window and watched the village slide past. It was especially interesting to see Hislop House from this different viewpoint and she was proud to see how nice the garden looked. Something moved at the front room window. For a fleeting instant Grace thought she saw a man's face then they were past down the road and she forgot everything in the avalanche of new sights.

They chugged along narrow lanes and she saw men hoeing endless rows of vegetables, and orchards where ripening apples weighted branches toward the ground. A horse cantered loose in a field beside them then bucked and raced the other way. Outside a cottage a woman stretched to hang clothes on a line while a child handed more up to her. They laughed and Grace wished she could have heard what they said.

The bus slowed to wade through bleating gray wool herded by an intent black and white border collie and a shepherd who shouted encouragement, a toothless old man waved

from where he worked on a cut-and-laid fence, and a boy sidled past on a nervous thoroughbred. Grace, her nose almost touching the glass, didn't want to miss a thing and around her hummed continuous conversation as villagers discussed the foibles of their children, menfolk, friends and relatives.

The road became wider and other traffic joined them, whizzing past. Houses sat elbow to elbow then changed to rows of brick look-alikes. Grace's courage wavered then she thought about the dress and her trip and was confident again.

When everyone stood in the narrow aisle she joined them. A basket grazed her chin, she was almost overwhelmed by perfume, and she could see nothing but the solid back in front of her. She almost fell when the bus jerked to a halt and was then pushed and shoved until she arrived in the street and looked back to see the bus empty, its passengers already vanished.

"Do you know the way Luv?" the conductress asked.

Grace felt the coins still in the palm of her hand and her face went hot with guilt. She held them out. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Never you mind." The conductress winked. "Now you just go down that street there and you'll see an arch. That's the market. Enjoy yourself." She winked again and swung onto the bus which was already moving.

Grace waved to her. What a nice lady! She tucked the coins into her purse and set off in the indicated direction. People jostled her all in a hurry and when she turned under

the arch her senses were assailed by a great hubbub and stew of farm smells.

"Make way!" A couple of scared-eyed calves bucketed past driven by a stick waving farmer and his dog. A truck loaded with crates of chickens honked and nudged through the crowd feathers floating in its wake, and men bumped by with sacks of produce over their shoulders. Cows bawled, ducks quacked, dogs barked, men, women and children shouted. Close at hand vendors called from boothes enticing shoppers to buy their fruits, flowers and vegetables.

"Only sixpence!" Grace looked at the yellow daisies held in front of her nose. Brandy would like those and she handed over her busfare as an old woman wrapped newspaper around the dripping stems for her.

She enjoyed the excitement though her feet were stepped on and it was all she could do to keep the flowers from being crushed. Trapped for a moment between two oblivious men she was steered into a large opensided building. It was quieter in here and Grace saw benches filled with farmers who faced a sawdust covered ring. In it a one-horned heiffer bellowed. A man's voice rang out in a kind of song ending with the thud of a hammer. The heiffer was led away to be replaced by another.

"Out of the way, Miss, you'll get yourself trampled." A man pushed past Grace leading a bull by a stick snapped to a ring in its nose. It rolled small angry eyes and Grace slid onto the bench beside her. While the bull was being sold

she tried to see how the audience signalled their bids but it was hard to catch them, a voice here a quick hand movement there. Finally the hammer fell and a small wiry fellow in a sweat-stained hat and with a pleased glint in his eye strode forward to collect his purchase. He looked much too slight to control a massive creature like that bull, Grace thought as she watched them leave the building.

A shrill whinny snatched her attention back to the ring which now held a head-tossing mare, her eyes white ringed as she called to the foal that dashed around and around her. Grace was relieved when at last it stopped and ducked its head under its dam to drink. They were a lovely pair, both flaming chestnut and the mare so tenderly proud and protective of the filly who now looked about with an air of wonderment, tongue flicking for the last taste of milk. The wham of the hammer made them both start and glancing at the auctioneer Grace saw him point to two different men. Mare and foal had been sold separately. They can't part them, they can't! With increasing distress Grace saw the mare led off in one direction, calling desperately over her shoulder to the foal who struggled against the halter being fitted behind its ears. Spectators laughed as it reared and struck out at the man who tried to lead it, and a man with a broom threatened its rump.

Leaving the daisies forgotten on the bench Grace fought her way toward the ring, pushing at the farmers who now blocked the aisle insensible to her efforts. "They mustn't, they mustn't"

she half sobbed and pushed past the last human barrier. The ring was empty. Only flies circled the sawdust.

A scuffle at the doorway and suddenly the world seemed full of fat baaing lambs. Grace wandered desconsolately to the exit and stood blinking in dusty sunlight. The medley of sounds enveloped her, continuing as though nothing had happened. People called from their stalls and a child dropped a bag of onions and scampered among the feet of passersby to collect them. As though awakening from a nightmare Grace felt the panic slide from her as she left the market place and went under the arch onto the street.

It was quiet out here and she remembered the dress she had come for. After studying Brandy's map she set out confidently, looking with increasing interest at the shops. So many clothes and radios, ovens, shoes and sets of crockery. Whoever bought them all? A revolving display of lipsticks in a drugstore window stopped her. Brandy wore lipstick. Grace went inside where rows of counters stretched away from her full of colorful bottles and jars. Scarves hung from a rack and lights and mirrors made the store brighter than day. A woman in a pink smock came toward her smelling a concentrate of the things she sold. "Can I help you Miss?"

"I would like to buy a lipstick."

"Come right up here, there're plenty to choose from."

Grace saw the mirrors surrounding the woman and stood her ground. "I saw some in the window," she said.

"They're all up here, Miss."

Suddenly Grace saw the revolving stand and darted toward it, picking out the color of lipstick Brandy used. "I'll take this one," she called holding it out toward the woman who, with a frown, came and got it and the money.

Her lips became a bitter line when she had to return all the way from the cash register to give the package to Grace but her anger was hardly noticed in the thrill of Grace's first purchase. Hurridly she went outside and standing in the doorway took out the golden tube and rubbed colour on her lips, opening her mouth the way Brandy did. She felt the moistness and smelt the waxy smell then, conscious of her new appearance, headed gaily toward the dress shop.

"My God what's this coming?"

It was a slow day in the shop and Elsie and Myra had been entertaining themselves by criticizing everyone who walked by.

"Poor little thing. Must be simply awful to look like that." Elsie searched for a nail file in her hand-bag and carefully sanded a long nail, still watching the hump shouldered little woman's crippled progress. "I wouldn't have the nerve to go out myself. Don't let her see you staring now."

"See her look at those dresses in the window. I do believe she's coming in! Now why on earth ... You take her Elsie, she makes me feel funny," Myra shivered as she patted

her hair. The bell on the door chimed. "Yech! Look at that lipstick!"

"Shh." Elsie arranged a smile and went forward. "May I help you Ma'am?"

Grace was fascinated for a moment by the batting of false eyelashes then she remembered the dress she had already fallen in love with. "I would like that dress please." She pointed.

"Who is it for, Ma'am? Do you know the size?"

"It's for me. Size ten."

Darkly lined eyes measured Grace's body and looked doubtful. "I don't really know if we have ... perhaps a sixteen would be better - if we raised the hem."

"Size ten." Grace repeated and turned away to run her hands through the dresses on the rack beside her.

"Now here's a dress would suit you."

Grace turned to see the shop girl holding a tentlike red and white monstrosity. At first she was angry then she felt pity for the girl. She must be new at the job and the woman up front who kept watching them, although she tried to look as though she wasn't, must be her employer. Oh dear, she mustn't get the poor creature in trouble. "Now you really must listen when a customer asks for something." Grace spoke very quietly. "I want that coppery dress in a size ten please."

"But copper really isn't your ..."

"Copper suits me very well." Goodness some people are

dense Grace thought.

"Well, Ma'am, it will probably be on that rack over there if you'd care to look through them. I'll leave you for a few moments just in case you see something else." With a swish, swish of stockinged legs she left.

Grace enjoyed being alone among all these lovely clothes and she took many from where they hung and spun and swooped them from their hangers as though they were graceful dancing ladies. But when she came to the copper one she knew she had been right in her choice. It would go beautifully with her hair and make her eyes look like cool emeralds. It would fit her slender body perfectly and the skirt would flare when she walked. Oh it was perfect and she sighed and hugged it to her ecstatically.

Elsie swished back the length of the store prepared to hurry this customer back into the street. "You've found what you want Ma'am? Impatience died as it met the joy that radiated from the crippled woman's face.

"Isn't it the most beautiful dress you ever saw? I'm going home you see and I want to look especially nice. They haven't seen me for ages." The little woman spoke breathlessly and held the dress against her. Doesn't it suit me and go with my hair? How lucky I am to have found it!"

Elsie was puzzled. The dress looked terrible against the sallow skin, its slimness a mockery of the strange shape

behind it and nothing could ever flatter that kinky soot colored hair. Suddenly she met the earnest violet eyes and it was as if an electric shock struck her. Why they're beautiful! she thought, they really are! And she forgot all the rest.

"You'll look lovely," she heard herself say. "Would you care to try it on?" What a disaster that would be, she could have bitten her tongue for suggesting it!

"No thanks, I just know it'll be perfect." Smiling, Grace relinquished the dress and Elsie led the way up front desperately warning Myra with her eyes not to say anything.

She packed it carefully in sheets of tissue, ignoring the smirk on Myra's face, and packed it in one of the boxes they saved for their best customers. She rang the price on the register, took the money and handed the box into the impatient hands that awaited it. Again the violet eyes held her.

"Thank you so very much. I'm sorry if I was impatient, it must be very difficult when you're new to a job. It'll be easier in a day or two I'm sure. Good-bye." With a nod and a smile the little woman headed for the door hugging the box to her chest.

"Well, what was all that about? The dress'll never fit her you know."

Elsie watched the figure hobbling along the pavement outside. "Maybe she'll fix it," she said. "You know she made me feel as though I'd just given her a big present."

"Humph," said Myra attending to her lipstick. "You're

crazy as she is. Come on let's eat."

But Elsie looked out of the window a while longer. "Poor ugly little thing," she murmured.

Grace felt anything but a poor little thing. She felt the luckiest person alive as she walked through the lunch time throng smiling and thinking how envious they'd all be if they knew about the lovely dress that was now hers. She longed to be home with it and went straight to the bus stop and jumped aboard the bus that already waited.

Settled beside a window she pried open a corner of the package so she could peek in at the material and stroke it. She imagined how fine she'd look getting off the train, mother and the rest all waiting.

The seat bounced as someone sat beside her.

"Grace? Grace, is that you?"

Grace turned toward the bent, gray haired woman who spoke.

"Grace dear, how good to see you! How are you?"

Grace felt a stir of recognition, as though she had known and loved this person long ago but she couldn't quite remember so she just smiled.

"Don't you recognize me? I'm Mrs. Clarke, your old teacher. But it's been so long, of course you've forgotten."

There was something important Grace wanted to say to this woman but it slipped about her mind and she couldn't quite catch it. For a moment she felt very young and afraid of some-

thing. She knew this woman was the only one who could save her, then like a minnow it all slipped away and she was looking into a stranger's kindly face. She felt the joy of the new dress beneath her hand and wanted to share it. "I'm sorry, I'm forgetful sometimes. I bought a dress." She held up the box. "If you look in this corner you can see it."

"Mrs. Clarke peeked in. "It does look lovely."

"I'm off home for a visit soon and I want to look my best. Dorset is where I live. Have you been there?"

"No I don't think I have but ..."

"You should go, it's very beautiful country. Of course it's lovely here too, especially the hill. I work in Linlea you see. I'm Mr. Daly's housekeeper. Do you know him?"

"Yes, but Grace dear ..."

"You can't imagine how I look forward to going home..."

As Grace burbled on Mrs. Clarke became more and more confused and a little frightened. All those years alone, she thought, poor thing no wonder she lives in dreams. I should have tried harder to help her but Tom was so horrid and there were always so many other children to think about ...

"My goodness that journey seemed short. I did enjoy talking to you Mrs. Clarke. I hope we meet again one day."

They were in the aisle, then standing in the street. "Take care Grace." Mrs. Clarke called as she watched Grace rush toward her home, the dress box hugged tight against her side.

CHAPTER XIII

Eagerly Grace galloped upstairs, the sound of the slamming front door still echoing behind her. Halfway she stopped and peered between the bannister rails. Was that a light in the kitchen? Putting down her package and purse she went to see and pushing the kitchen door wide she saw Tom Daly slumped over the table. Her eyes travelled from him to the broken bottle by his feet, to the glasses on the table, cigarettes in the saucer and chairs pushed back in disarray. The room reeked of liquor, sweat and smoke and she flung the window open and looked for a moment into the garden.

The sight of the man when she turned back was even more offensive. In his own room she was immune to anything he did, but now he invaded her and Brandy's world and had let his cronies in too. He snorted and snuffled into his sleeve. Anger rose in Grace and she eyed with disgust the coarse bloated face pushed out of shape where it rested on his arm.

"Tom Daly," her voice rose loud and harsh, "You are an evil horrible man. I may have to look after you but I'll not allow your filthy friends in the house. I'm not afraid

of you like that poor daughter of yours. I don't know how she stood you and I sure don't blame her for going away. And you know something? I don't care if you drink yourself to death!" She glared at him feeling relieved and light as though she'd shed a long carried burden.

She remembered the dress on the stairs and shaking the ugliness in the kitchen from her thoughts ran to pick it and her purse up and carry them to her room. Soon the dress lay across her bed and she straightened it and stroked it, delaying the moment of trying it on until she could wait no longer. Then shucking the dress she wore stood in her slip and lifted the slippery material over her head. It smelled fresh and new and her heart beat quickly with excitement.

A crash came from downstairs and a croaking bellow. "Grace! Grace!"

Grace lowered her arms and the dress. For a moment she hesitated then with a sigh laid it back on the bed, put on her old one and headed for the kitchen. "Damn him, damn him," she muttered over and over and when she saw him lying on the floor flaying about like a landed fish she had a good mind to leave him there.

"Help me," he moaned and reached for her foot which he held in a painful grasp.

She kicked him loose then pulled him to his feet and with the evil smelling weight of him resting on her they struggled to his room. As Grace pulled the covers over him a grin

crawled across his face. "I c'n walk again!" he said and passed out.

Grace winced at his words. She didn't want him to walk - ever - but what could she do? Only hope the whiskey would hurt him like the doctor warned. O let it be soon she prayed.

No time for the dress now, Brandy would be back soon, dinner must be eaten, dishes washed, then... The dress could wait a few hours more.

The shape of it danced in front of Grace all through the meal. "You'll see it first day of vacation," she told Brandy and was suprised to hear herself, for from the moment she'd bought it she'd looked forward to showing it to her friend. Now for some unknown reason she had decided to wait, but she described it enthusiastically then pumped Brandy for information about her day.

It was eight o'clock when Grace finally got to her room. She pulled the blinds and turned on the lamp. The dress shimmered as though alight with tiny flames and, her old dress pooled in a heap about her feet, she felt the new material pour over her arms and shoulders like spring rain. For a moment she drowned blissfully in its depths then she could breath again. She felt a tightness across her back, dragging over her shoulders and around her hips. Crushed with dismay she kicked at the hem that dangled to her ankles. It <u>was</u> the wrong size! They must have marked it wrong. Tears blurred its color as the cloth

whispered lies past her ears and she threw it onto the bed and herself sobbing after it. Because she was a stranger in the shop they had deceived her! Disappointment changed to anger and she sat up. What a fool I am. I'll fix it. Immediately she got her sewing basket and worked late into the night.

It was past one when she pulled the final thread and cut it. This time when the dress settled on her shoulders she knew it was right. No pulling anywhere and the hem swirled softly just below her knees. She knew she looked beautiful and she laughed and twirled with happiness.

An engine roared outside and with the dress rustling like wings she ran into Brandy's room and looked out the window. Brandy and Michael stood below holding hands beside the now silent motorbike. She could hear them talking softly and Grace's breath fluttered in her throat as she saw the man's face in the moonlight. It was a beautiful sensitive face, but strong with eyes darkly serious and hair tossed and tangled like a child's. Grace's hands longed to straighten it. She heard the purr of his voice and saw the strength of his limbs. As she watched the two figures clung together. "Goodnight," they whispered and parted. Grace felt his warm breath on her ear. The motorcycle roared and grew distant and she heard Brandy come in downstairs.

Quickly she went to her own room, moving in a state of euphoria, and stood at her own window looking into the night,

seeing the young man's face and loving it.

After a while she took off the dress and hung it in the wardrobe, then in bed she curled up tightly, thrilled with the new posession that bloomed in her heart. Soon she slept and dreamed.

Brandy, Brandy, she called to the girl who ran ahead of her in the russet dress. Brandy! But all that came out was a whisper and she ran through clinging mud, struggling and sliding. At last she was close and reached for a sleeve but before she could touch it the figure turned and smiled with bright clown lips. Grace stood frozen, one hand still reaching as the smiling Brandy put her hand to her chin and removed her face. There was another underneath. She removed that also while Grace watched in petrified horror, a scream fighting to explode. She knew there would be something terrible under the last face but she couldn't look away, and still Brandy peeled off one mask after another. Grace knew the next must be it. She caught a glimpse of glistening red pulp, then from behind her Michael's voice rose in an agonized cry.

Grace lay soaked in sweat, unable to move. Slowly the dream receded and she remembered moonlight on a young man's face and fell back to sleep.

She awoke with the sun, watching it rise like the birth

of new life and she quivered with joy for the day and her new-born feelings. How gentle his kiss had been. Eyes half closed she felt it on her own lips and her heart quickened. He stayed with her all morning; when she looked toward the hill molded by sunlight into voluptuous curves, when she talked to Brandy over breakfast.

"What does Michael do at the Hunt kennels?" she asked facing away so Brandy couldn't read her eyes.

"He works with hounds. He hopes to be Huntsman one day." Brandy was eager to talk about him and by the time she left for work Grace waved goodbye feeling they shared a deep secret, and during the day she often stopped in her tracks lost in a daydream, or burst into song unable to contain her rapture.

During the following days villagers wondered to hear her singing as she worked in the now thriving garden and children peeked through the gate to see the funny lady their parents talked about. If Grace saw them she would beckon and invite them to pick apples from the laden trees but they ran away, obeying parents orders, while Grace puzzled watched them go.

Inside the house Tom Daly lurked, his strength again failing so each day found it easier to stay and drink in his room than face the stairs. As he drank he brooded on methods to return his daughter to the nerveracked slave he had tormented with such enjoyment through the years. He snarled at the friends who smuggled bottles up to him and accused them of stealing his money; then had to bribe them to return again.

It cost him more all the time as they also feared a meeting with Grace who attacked them with her tongue and drove them from the house if she saw them.

Sometimes Tom broke things in his frustration. Things he knew Grace cared about but she quietly swept up the shattered crystal bowl or the slivers of willow pattern pitcher without a glance toward him.

Tom's body became heavier, his mind weaker and the liquor disappeared ever more quickly.

The house windows glared fiery with sunrise behind Grace as she stood in the road beside the taxi. Her new dress made her move self-consciously, especially after the exclaimations of suprise and admiration when Brandy had first seen it.

"See you in ten days, Grace. Goodbye." After a quick hug Brandy climbed into the car and shut the door. Then she was gone.

Grace stood alone in the road still waving. It was very quiet and the windows had gone dull behind her. All night her stomach had churned in anticipation as the long discussed and looked forward to moment of vacation arrived. She and Brandy had chattered until late, excited one moment, in tears at having to leave Michael and Kismet the next. Now she stood alone in her beautiful copper dress not knowing what to do.

As though carried by the morning breeze she drifted into the house and sat in Brandy's chair at the kitchen table

holding a cup of tea in her hands. The tan color of it was all she saw and it became the leather jacket of the cab driver. She heard the chug of the engine and felt the sway of the old cab as it rushed along lanes toward town. Soon she saw the streets and the traffic and didn't notice the dishes her hands washed while she walked through the bustle of the train station carrying her suitcase to a compartment where she settled onto a faded seat and looked out upon scurrying crowds. As she made the beds Grace heard the clickety-clack of train wheels and the whistle's high toot, saw the country Brandy had described and knew she would soon be home.

At last she alighted at the familiar Dorset platform and was surrounded by the chatter and arms of her family. In the afternoon she walked through fields with her brothers and sisters, calling Doc Lancelot, and at night she wept a little out of loneliness for Michael then snuggled happily into the sheets of home.

Cock-a-doodle-doo ! Brandy's pet rooster awoke Grace and she dashed down to the sunbright kitchen to be greeted by hugs, smiles and the rich smell of bacon and toast mother prepared at the stove.

They were fine happy days during which Grace's spirit lived a hundred miles away while in Linlea her body went dutifully about its chores. In her dreamworld she hiked across fields with her father to inspect new stock, scratched the forehead of the new hunter who cantered up for a carrot,

fed geese that waddled honking toward her, and drank lemonade on the porch while everyone talked and laughed.

Then suddenly five days after Brandy had left she awoke to quiet and the kitchen when she entered it was that of Hislop House. Confused she ran to Brandy's room and pulled out the drawer in which Brandy kept her letters from home. Avidly Grace read them and found her way back to Dorset.

But it was hard to stay there now. As though she walked a tight-rope one slip and the Dorset life disappeared and she was left deserted and empty. She began to spend most of her time in Brandy's room surrounded by the letters and photographs. Soon she only left it to get food and care for the man.

The ache inside her grew until one evening it drove her from the house and down the lane toward the old Mill. There she hovered in the peppery dark wondering why she had come. She edged into the bushes and peeked through the pub window but saw no familiar shape inside. She went over to the stream and stood listening to its mournful ripple.

"Hello. Is that Miss Daly?"

Grace spun around to face the figure that came toward her and her heart cried out in welcome, her throat soundless with joy.

"I'm Brandy's friend, Mike."

O Mike. Dear darling Mike as if I don't know you. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, be held against his chest. "I know," she said and smiled.

"Is everything all right? I expect you miss her."

How kind he sounded. How understanding his eyes.

"She'll be back soon now. She's told me a lot about you, how good you are to her."

His hand pulled away and Grace's felt bereft. "Dorset is a lovely place but she misses you very much." Grace spoke softly, loving every curve and line of his face.

The pub door opened and a man shouted, "Coming Mike? We're ready to start."

Mike waved to him then turned back to Grace. "Must go. I'm on the dart team. Can't let them down. I'm sure I'll see you again soon, Grace, good-bye." He touched her arm. "Don't worry about anything now."

She watched him stride away. Thought for a moment about going back to the window but decided she'd rather have him in her mind alone and talking to her so she stayed where she was, the stream singing and herself trembling and warm. His eyes were so kind. Did he like her? Could he...? Would he? Grace knew he would love her. Maybe he did already a little. Hadn't he touched her and said he'd see her again soon? She wandered up the lane full of dreams and smiling at anyone she met and she wondered what they'd say if they knew her secret. Her and Michael's secret.

Doc appeared from nowhere and grinned up at her. Grace went down on her knees and hugged him, whispering in his ear, "Mike wants to see me again." The dog shook his head

and licked her nose before trotting off on private nocturnal business.

Grace leaned against Manor Farm's wall, the afternoon's warmth still held in it against her back. Looking around the village she loved every light in every window and wished she could hug the child that wailed somewhere - tell it the world wasn't gray, that it was really full of rainbows.

There was one creature she could share her happiness with and eagerly she followed the wall to a gate which she eased open into a cobbled stable yard. She went on into the stable itself, dark and sleepy with good smells and contented sounds; the swish of hay pulled from a net, the clump of a resting hoof, a whiffling sigh.

She knocked against something. Every noise stopped and she felt herself watched. Soon she could make out the shapes of listening horses through the bars that topped their loose box doors and she recognized Kismet at the far end of the bay.

It was like seeing an old friend and Grace ran to him, sliding back the bolt of his door and stepping through the thick straw without a moment's hesitation. The big horse lowered his head and blew into her hair.

"Dear Kismet, have you been lonely?" She reached her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his silken coat. Kismet nibbled her jacket then snatched a whisp of hay and began to chew. Grace ran her hands up his muscled

shoulder, along the sleekness of his ribs and stroked the gleam on his hind-quarters. She went back to his shoulder and leaned against it playing with his mane. She told him all about Michael and the longer she talked the more she could see he really did care about her. She talked her dreams into the big horse's ear until he dozed with his bottom lip hanging, and Grace, happily weary, made a nest in the straw at his feet.

Sudden light brought sleeping horses heaving to their feet and Grace blinked into the irate face of the man who stood in the doorway. "What the hell ..." he burst out.

Grace reached for the young horse.

The groom peered at her and took off his checkered cap to scratch his head. "Why you're Grace Daly aren't you? What the hell are you doing here, scaring the horses, letting them loose mebbe so they'll run in the street and break their knees or worse." He got louder as he went on and Grace pressed close to Kismet. "Why you ought to be locked up for this!" Spluttering the man stopped.

"I wouldn't hurt Kismet," Grace said.

For a moment the man stared then he started again. "You could've gotten trampled or kicked. This horse is only young. He doesn't know you. If something happened here the Colonel'd have my neck for sure." He grabbed Grace's arm and jerked her

out of the box bolting the door behind them. "Damn it woman, your Da always said ..."

The words jumbled into an unintelligible roar in Grace's head and she hung back feeling black depths reach for her, trying to pull her down into something she mustn't remember. Frantic, she looked for a way of escape but was trapped by the fury in the groom's eyes. She whimpered and behind them Kismet whinnied.

The grooms rage drained away and gentleness took its place. "I'm sorry to have spoken so rough Miss. but you gave me an awful scare. There there don't be so upset."

They were out by the road and the headlights of a car blinded them. It pulled to a stop. "What's up, Gilbert?" It was Michael's voice.

"Miss Daly here was in with the young horse."

"I'll take her home. Hop in Grace."

Grace scrambled up into the safety of the pickups cab her fears fading in the comfort of Michael's presence. She heard the men talking, mentioning Brandy and Kismet, and she felt a growing shame that Michael should hear of her encounter with the groom. But he said nothing as he drove down to her house and stopped with the engine softly chuntling. She sat looking at her knees.

"Grace? Grace?"

She looked up and her heart turned over to see his smile.

"He's a grumpy old man and it's a shame he caught you.

I'm sure Kismet was glad to see you and I'll bet he misses Brandy like the rest of us. I shouldn't go again though, the old man might have a heart attack!"

Grace nodded.

Leaning across her Michael opened the truck door. "Don't worry now, Grace, just acouple of days and she'll be home."

His face was so close - and then he smiled at her across the width of the cab again.

Grace climbed to the ground. "Who won the dart game?" she asked.

"We did," Michael said.

She shut the door and with a wave he drove away. Grace glanced back up the street and in the darkness saw the groom's dark shadow still watching her. She shivered, hearing again his voice shouting things that frightened and muddled her.

Clicking the gate firmly shut she ran into the house and straight up to Brandy's room where, quickly shedding her clothes, she dove into bed and pulled the covers over her head. In a little while she reached out one hand and brought Mother's photo into the safe darkness with her.

Next morning she awakened to a bright Dorset day.

CHAPTER XIV

Coo. Coo. Half awake Grace sat up and looked in suprise at the doves in the picture with the work horses. Three days had passed since the night of Kismet and Michael and today Brandy would return. She sprang out of bed and ran to the window. Two doves eyed her from the eaves overhead then gargled their call again and strutted back and forth as she leaned out and breathed deeply of the sweet morning air. The hill stood clear against cloudless blue sky and sunlight gleamed for a moment off a farmhouse window.

Suddenly churchbells broke the peace with slow mournful chimes of death and Grace slammed the window shut on the sound. How dare anyone cast gloom over such a wonderful day!

It took little time to dress and then she put clean sheets on the bed and tidied and cleaned until no one would guess she had spent most of the last week here. It looked untouched, waiting its rightful occupant.

Grace's every nerve was alert and listening, making her jump at every car that passed, every sound in the street. She

couldn't face breakfast, though she knew Brandy couldn't possibly arrive before noon, and took a tray up to the man and fussed around his room until he finished eating, casting glances out the window all the while. Then she pottered about the house and garden. By noon she leaned on the gate watching the road, walked back and forth on the path, sniffed honeysuckle, leaned again on the gate. Snippets of fear drifted. What if she waited and waited and Brandy never came? Grace's stomach spun and she went inside to look out Brandy's window, then down again to the gate.

Though suppertime came and she heard the man calling from his room she stayed there fingers white on the rail, eyes and ears straining, hearing only the bats that came with dusk. Aching and close to tears she hardly believed it when the taxi did pull up and she was laughing and gasping as Brandy got out. She tussled with the cases while Brandy paid the driver then they both went chattering and laughing into the house.

"Let's eat. You must be starved and I want to hear everything," Grace coaxed so they left the luggage in the bedroom and sat down at the table Grace had spread earlier with new bread, cheese, cold meats, cakes and cookies.

"It's so good to see you!" Grace said unable to take her eyes off her friend. "Now, tell me!" It was as if she were a half empty pitcher loosing more each day and now she was being filled again.

"I had such a terrific time I don't know where to start."

"Tell me everything from the beginning."

Brandy spoke through mouthfuls of late supper. "Well, when I arrived they were all there to meet me except for Jessica who'd insisted on riding her pony down to the station and then was furious because she wasn't allowed to bring it onto the platform and had to wait out on the road. But soon we were all together and everything was just the same as ever except that I felt a lot older than when I left. Mum had painted my room -"

"What color?" Grace broke in.

"Blue and white, and everyone had something to show me ..."

And so Grace lived every moment of Brandy's vacation and the fears of last week were as forgotten as last winter's storms - only her meeting with Michael glowed like a lantern from the darkness of it all.

Next day was as if Brandy had never been away and in the afternoon Grace, met by a tail wagging Doc, went for a long walk. Trees looked greener, magpies chased each other and butterflies fluttered about like escaped petals. Grace found a patch of the first ripe blackberries and ate as many as he could reach, then sat in the field and made a daisy chain. As her blackberry-purpled fingers split the delicate stems and carefully guided others through her mind was busy. Surely tonight Michael would come to see Brandy. Knowing she would see him so soon made her forget everything but the

beauty of his face and the beloved smell of his jacket. She must get him to come inside without Brandy suspecting what was between them. He would welcome the excuse. Surely he must be longing for it as much as she. Grace sighed and pulled the petals of a daisy. She'd suggest Brandy invite him in for a cup of cocoa, after all the nights were beginning to get nippy - and they'd all sit around together. What could be more wonderful! Calling Doc Grace slipped the daisy chain around his neck and they scampered toward home.

"That would be nice, Grace, as you say it does get cold at night now and half the time I don't think he even bothers to eat before he comes. You're sure its no trouble?"

"Of course not." Grace, inwardly rejoicing, smiled across the table and passed the potatoes.

When dinner was over and the kitchen straightened Brandy ran upstairs to change and Grace crept to her own room to brush her hair and put on lipstick. She wished she could wear her new dress but that would be too obvious, Brandy must never know about her and Michael. It must be kept their secret whatever pain keeping it might bring. Brandy must never be hurt.

Grace stood with the milk carton poised over the saucepan when the motorcycle roared up outside. She listened to Brandy going to the door, heard the two of them in the hall and suddenly the house was throbbing with Michael's

presence. Grace poured milk with her back to them when they entered the kitchen and hoped if her cheeks were as flushed as they felt Brandy would think it was from the heat of the stove.

"Grace I'd like you to meet Michael."

She turned, willing her eyes to show nothing. "How do you do? Sit down both of you, you must be chilled right through,Michael." It was hard to call him by name, she'd never done it before and her voice caught a little in the middle.

"Hello Grace. It's good to see you again."

Grace was suprised at first that he admitted to knowing her but then she realized it was probably best. Someone might mention it to Brandy and then she'd wonder.

His smile was a bolt of lightening and she turned away to hide the tumult it ignited in her.

"Where did you two meet? I didn't know you knew each other." Brandy said.

"Oh you don't know everything, does she Grace?" He winked at her.

"No not quite." Said Grace going along with him.

"Well you are a sneaky pair." Brandy beamed at them both.

Grace tried to laugh and set cups of cocoa in front of them, then stood back against the stove and watched as Brandy told Michael about her vacation. She overflowed with

love. Beautiful Brandy, wonderful Michael. She must keep them both forever. The talk changed to Michael who spoke of the Hunt horses and people they knew. Several times Grace caught his eye and read secret messages only for her. She took his cup for a refill and giving it back stood close behind him, almost touching his shoulder.

He looked at his watch. "We'd better be on our way if we're going to catch the movie. That was very good, Grace, thanks ."

"Come often." she said. "I get lonely." For you. For you. She knew he understood.

"I will. Good-bye."

"'Bye Grace, see you in the morning." called Brandy and the door shut behind them.

Grace stood in the hall remembering the look Michael had given her as he said good-bye and she felt a deep sadness for Brandy who would never know his deepest love was not hers.

After she got ready for bed she sat at Brandy's window and waited long hours until she heard the distant beat of the motorcycle. They were here and she watched them kiss good-night and knew his kiss was really for her. Then she watched him leave. Watched her lover leave.

As days got crisper Grace got the urge to travel farthur than her feet could take her and she remembered seeing an old

bicycle in the shed when she'd found the lawnmower. One afternoon she took it out and practiced riding it. As a child her mother had taught her so now after a few spills she had it mastered and set off carefully along the road. She didn't go far that first day but soon she gained confidence and went as far as the next village, then past it until time became her only boundary. She kept to side roads, stopping wherever anything took her fancy; leaning on a gate to watch boys play soccer or pausing to listen to piano music cascading from a cottage. There was so much to see, so many corners to look around and each time she set out it was with an air of eager expectancy.

She looked into busy farmyards, homes where women cleaned and sang and nursed babies, great estates with herds of deer grazing over close cropped parkland. These last she must have spent an hour watching, not noticing the cold evening wind until the "Ho!" of a cowman driving his soft footed cows past disturbed her musings.

The longing in Doc's eyes as he waited by the gate would not allow Grace to ride her bike every day and as the hill blushed color she and the dog often gamboled through fallen leaves, laughing in the crackling Autumn air. They spent hours on the hill and whenever they reached the top Grace would hug the elephant and whisper gratefulness in his ear.

Cub hunting season arrived and often the mornings awoke to the music of hounds and Grace listened knowing

that Brandy and Kismet, and probably Michael, were with them. Then she would bustle around making the kitchen warm and cooking hot porridge for Brandy's return.

One morning when the girl came in all Grace saw was the bleeding scratch under her eye and it was as if a lash struck her. "What happened?" she gasped.

"Goodness, Grace, it's only a scratch. You look as though I'd cut my head off! Someone let go a branch and it hit me, that's all."

"I must wash it." Grace was already rushing about for hot water, a basin and cottonwool. "Sit down." The welt that marred Brandy's perfection horrified her and she set to work as though she would wash it away.

"Ouch! Don't forget I'm here Grace, that's enough eh!"

Reluctantly Grace stopped her washing and got Brandy's breakfast but she couldn't stop thinking about the blemish and it haunted her all day. Bothered her so she stayed home that afternoon and it was the first thing she saw when Brandy came in at night.

The scratch faded leaving no scar but the one on Grace's mind that kept her afraid whenever Brandy was out of sight.

"Now you're sure you know the way? Along the road to Clevely and it's in the fields by the river. Kismet's class is at one."

"I know. I'll be there." Grace whisked Brandy's jacket vigorously.

It was the day of the long prepared for County Agricultural Show and though it had rained in the night the sun had pushed the clouds eastward and now a wind herded them like gray sheep to the edges of the sky.

"Where's my cap and gloves? Gosh I wish my stomach didn't get into such a tizzy!" Brandy rushed about collecting things then stood in front of Grace. "Do I look O.K.?"

"Terrific," said Grace. "Now be careful and good luck." She watched Brandy go then prepared for her own outing.

"I'm off to the show," she told the man. "I'll put these sandwiches by your bed for lunch and a thermos of tea so you'll be all right till I get back."

His voice rose loudly but Grace ignored it, saw nothing else needed doing, and went to her own room. She changed into her copper dress, put on lipstick and combed her hair. She must look her best for Kismet's first outing in a show-ring.

When she wheeled her bike onto the road she was excited and not knowing how long the journey would take she pedaled as quickly as she could and was soon hot and worried the perspiration would mark her dress. Traffic was heavier than any she had yet encountered and as she neared the show grounds she rode beside a steady line of cars, cattle trucks, horse-boxes and buses. She was afraid she might fall and kept her eyes glued to the road so the show entrance came as a suprise

and she bumped over rough ground until with relief she saw an area roped off especially for bikes. Safely parked she straightened her dress, brushed a streak of mud from her skirt and dabbed the perspiration from her nose, then she joined the flow of people who headed toward a snowfield of tents whose pennants and flags whipped and snapped against the sky. Laughter and shouts rose above a tapestry of sound containing bursts of music and distant applause and Grace rushed eager to be part of it all.

A bulbous nosed man at the entrance took her three shillings and then she was submerged in farm families, all dressed in their sunday best, who jostled and laughed as they spread toward the myriad displays. Grace felt confused with so much to look at and wandered from booths of pet supplies, where she collected a sample cookie for Doc, to displays of art, pottery, tack for horses, books, flowers and a slick haired man selling insurance. She wandered through farm machinery and cattle feed, watched a Gypsy couple with a half naked baby sell leather skirts, belts and handbags, looked at different types of telephones which amazed her as she'd never before seen one at all and watched a movie about off shore oil rigs by an oil company which she didn't understand but thought fascinating.

A stand selling cold milk was a welcome oasis and she bought a carton with a straw in it. A cup of strawberries was handed to her by a red haired boy who said, "Compliments

of Hitree Farms," and she took them both and sat on a bench in a small backwater of calm. The milk slid down cold and refreshing and she would have bought another but was afraid the boy would think she wanted more free strawberries so she daren't. Instead she sucked her empty straw and watched the crowd. Ruddy faced farmers with their newly permanented wives tried to enjoy themselves despite the small children they dragged by one arm and the larger ones who dashed wildly in and out of exhibits. Old people walked slowly with secret remembering smiles and young couples held hands and looked at each other. All shapes and sizes, they passed, and Grace saw some glance her way and whisper to each other and she knew they admired her dress and was glad she wore it. Confidently she smiled at them and loved everyone.

The clock over the white prefabricated bank with window boxes bursting geraniums told her it was one half hour to Brandy's class so she dropped her empty containers into a trash can and rejoined the crowd. Voices buzzed like summer bees and smells floated and mixed; crushed grass, turpentine, cattle feed, hot tractor engines, food, flowers and sweat, a blind person could have told everything that was there. Applause from ahead pulled Grace on and soon she came to a grassy bank upon which people sat looking across white railings into a large velvety green ring dotted by shining red and white jumps, their wings decorated with leaves and flowers. A fat woman moved her picnic basket to make room and Grace sat down.

At that moment in the ring's center a stout man in a top hat, red jacket, white breeches and high boots blew a coaching horn and as though sprung from a catapult a gray pony galloped between two flags carrying a crimson faced little girl. They flew over the first three fences, then at the fourth the pony stopped, sending the child far up its neck. The pony dropped its head to graze and its rider slid slowly to the ground. She mounted again and jumped the rest of the fences giving the pony's rump a sharp rap at each one and Grace joined in the clapping as they left the ring.

More ponies and children followed and though Grace found it very exciting her stomach was tense with anticipation for Kismet's turn.

When the children's jumping was finished the fat woman pulled egg sandwiches from her basket and shared them with the little boy on her other side who seemed more interested in Grace than anything and kept peeking around at her. It made Grace uncomfortable and she wished he'd stop.

She forgot him finally in admiration of the hackneys that now climbed their way around pulling delicate carts and elegantly attired drivers. But even as they paraded men were busy about the jumps making them higher and wider. Was Kismet going to have to jump those. Grace thought nervously, after all he was only young. She looked toward the collecting ring and saw a group of waiting horses and riders. Among them she found the heads of Brandy and Kismet.

"Class ten. Novice jumpers." The voice boomed over the loud-speaker.

The proud high-stepping hackneys left and a lone horse and rider entered, circled and at the signal started their round. Horse after horse came, completed or was disqualified from its course, and left. Grace grew more apprehensive with each one but when Brandy and Kismet did enter the ring all she felt was pride at how handsome they looked.

The big young horse showed off, snorting and looking at the crowd until Brandy slapped his neck for attention as they met the first brush fench. Suprised to see it Kismet gave an awkward leap but cleared it and then looked toward the next. This he jumped beautifully, Grace was sure no horse had ever jumped so well, he seemed to clear everything effortlessly until the double when he lost his stride and hit the second fence hard. He faltered for a moment but Brandy calmed him with her hands and drove him into the final triple bar so he sailed over it giving a buck when he landed that made the crowd laugh and applaud. Grace laughed too and clapped furiously. She wished she were at the gate to congratulate them and hurridly pushed her way to the ropes of the collecting ring. She saw Brandy with Kismet at the far end talking to a group of people and ducked under the rope to go to her.

"Sorry Miss. Only competitors allowed."

Grace looked up at the guard who blocked her way. "But Brandy and Kismet ... those others aren't all competitors."

"I expect they're good friends. Run along now, Miss."

"But I'm..."

"On your way, Miss."

People were watching and smirking. If Brandy would just look this way, but she didn't and Grace backed into the crowd wanting to escape. She left the environs of the ring brooding over her disappointment, but soon the busyness around her lifted her spirits and after buying an ice-cream cone she felt better.

Loud voices attracted her attention and she went toward a small gathering above which towered the head and shoulders of a man. When she got close she saw he stood on a chair and spoke excitedly waving one arm. The other was a pinned empty sleeve. Strands of hair flopped around his almost bald head and his eyes, dark and wild, seemed only to see the thoughts he spoke.

"The races must be kept pure! Do you want a world of hybrids? The cultures of the past muddied and destroyed? This influx of foreigners into our country must be halted, can't you see what's happening? Our architecture, our literature, music, even our sports will change. The world will become one bland sameness. What I fought for will be lost and the dreams of our ancestors destroyed."

Some in the crowd grunted and nodded agreement but a youngish fellow with a bright scarf around his neck shouted, "It's a free world ain't it, mate? I thought you fought for that!"

"Free he says, free! Ha!" Grace feared the speaker would fall off his chair he seemed driven to such a frenzy. "So free I can't rent my house to who I want, or hire who I want. It's you young ones who never had anything real to fight against who spoil things. You don't care about your country, too busy about everyone else's. Can't see for the marijuana smoke in your eyes!"

"Everyone should have an equal chance," someone shouted.

Grace didn't understand what the man meant but she knew his overexcitement disturbed people, put them against him, and she felt sorry to hear them shout rudely back at him.

His voice overpowered them. "Are you blind? There'll be no British, no Africans. Just a mixture worth nothing!"

"You don't look worth much now, feller me lad," a small man called out, grinning at the tall woman who hung on his arm.

"Look about you!" Spittle flew from the speaker's mouth. "It's already started." His eyes darted and settled triumphantly on Grace. "We'll be a nation of freaks and half-breeds. Look about you I say, a nation of monsters!"

He kept staring at Grace and others, following his look, began to snigger and nudge one another. Grace looked around but saw nothing to laugh at and suddenly she hated the man and the people who'd heckled him and left them to their foolishness. She went in search of happy people and headed toward an area from which came laughter and loud music, departing the showground proper for the gaudy clamor of a carnival.

Rich food smells met her and the noise was all encompassing. Pings, pops, bangs, shouts, blaring crashes of music, shrieks and engines all matching the whirling rides that tossed and rushed screaming people up to the sky and down again. Grace watched entranced, lost like a child in their adventure, laughing and gasping with delight. She walked slowly completely fascinated by this chaotic world and stopped in front of a man who stood outside a tent and shouted with half shut eyes, "Walk up, walk up. Sights stranger than fiction. Amazing phenomena you'll never forget."

Grace went closer.

Two young boys pushed past, their perspiring mother in tow.

The barker repeated his spiel.

"Come on, ma, let's go in." The boys tugged the reluctant woman closer.

"Is it cool in there?" she asked hopefully.

"Walk up, walk up. Amazing sights," the man called, holding out his hand for her money.

Sighing she rooted in her purse and she and the boys disappeared through a canvas curtain.

Grace laid sixpence in the man's grimy palm and with a thrill of expectation followed close behind.

She found herself in a muggy dark tunnel, all noise from outside cut off. Three figures ahead of her peered into illuminated alchoves. "Coo, Ma, look at that!"

Grace went to the alchove nearest her . At first all

she could see was a bottle then she made out a shape inside it that gave her a crawly feeling. A sign told her what it was; deformed animal and human fetus. It made her sick to look at the pallid curled shapes and she wanted to leave but the family ahead still gawked and exclaimed, blocking the way.

Someone else came in behind her and Grace was trapped in front of one exhibit whose eye stared at her, seeming to grow larger and smaller. Perspiration dripped down Grace's nose and she wanted to scream and attack the walls to let her out. She felt she would soon suffocate and stood afraid to move a muscle lest she break down completely and cause a scene.

At last there was room ahead and she bolted through a curtain into a large cave. Three stages each displayed a dimly lit figure and Grace stood with the family in front of the first. It was a man who sat on a chair reading a paperback. His skin was encrusted with scales which the lighting made sickly green. His only clothing was a pair of green shorts and his toe and finger nails were long and thick.

One of the boys reached out and touched an ankle.

"Hands off. You want to catch it?" his mother squealed, yanking him backwards.

The man yawned and turned the page of his book.

On the next stage an extremely fat woman sprawled on a couch and ate chocolates. She sported a sparse but obvious beard and Grace wondered why she didn't cut it off and lose

weight. Embarrassed and uncomfortable Grace longed to get out into the fresh air. Hastily she moved to the last exhibit.

The ugliness of the dwarf who stood looking at them startled her. His too large head balanced neckless between his shoulders, one of which slanted down, the other rising like a camel's hump. His long arms dangled shovel sized hands almost to his ankles and his legs were bowed with one longer than the other. He wore yellow tights and they and the lights gave him a sickly pallor, emphasizing the deep furrows in his cheeks. Grace shuddered as two enormous eyes delved into hers and she sank into a well of unbearable suffering. She stepped forward longing to take the poor creature into her arms and for a moment time stood still.

A mocking light lit deep in the eyes and grew until it spilled over to the wide mouth that split into a ferret's grin. It seemed a grin of recognition and with a cry Grace ran from it and stood blinking in sunlight and noise outside.

"Walk up, walk up," the barker was shouting, "Amazing phenomena you'll never forget." As she rushed past him Grace thought she heard him laugh.

She ran until he was out of sight and sound and then she walked on and on looking in every booth and ride for a mirror. She didn't know why she must find one. She could see nothing but the dwarf, every face seemed to be his, only the mirror could destroy the fear that threatened to consume her.

Suddenly she saw the mirrored center pole of the carousel surrounded by swooping exquisite horses with bright glass eyes, open mouths, jewelled bridles and laughing children on their backs. She found a place where she would be reflected between the galloping animals and as music rollicked and pounded about her she searched among the people in the glass. Some walked, some stood, a fat man, a smiling mother holding a baby, a strange staring little woman. So many but she couldn't find herself. She searched desperately as the horses rushed round and round and she felt fear swell inside her. The tiny lady with the wild eyes frightened her and she willed her to go away. All at once she saw herself, tall and young and strong, and her fears evaporated like summer mist. A laugh rose like a sob as she watched the sun play in her russet hair and her heart joined the music and danced with the prancing horses.

When she turned to leave she bumped into someone close beside her.

"Hi Grace, wondered when you'd notice me. " Brandy took her arm. "Let's find somewhere for tea."

CHAPTER XV

Grace and Brandy left the carnival for the comparative peace of the Agricultural Show.

"You looked absolutely terrific in the ring," Grace was saying, "But they wouldn't let me in to see you afterward."

"I'm so sorry. I watched for you, then the Colonel and his friends came to look at Kismet and I guess I just missed you. Anyway look!" Pulling a yellow ribbon from her pocket Brandy flourished it proudly. "Third prize! Pretty good for his first try eh?"

"It sure is!"

They entered a tent advertising "Teas" and sat at a small wobbly table. Brandy ordered for them both and Grace realized she was hungry and glad to sit down.

"What have you been doing?" Brandy asked.

Grace leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I've seen horrible things Brandy. In a tent back there ... dead babies in jars and that wasn't the worst, there were real people, alive on stages. A bearded lady and an aligator man and..."

Somehow she didn't want to talk about the other one. "It must be terrible to have something wrong with you like that. You know for a moment when I came out of there I imagined I was like them and, Brandy, it was awful. We're so lucky you and I, and you know what," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "I think we're as good looking as anyone I've seen all day. It may sound conceited but it's not really evil to appreciate one's own luck is it?"

A woman arrived with bread and butter, cakes and tea. As they were being set down Grace noticed Brandy's face wore the strained expression she had seen quite often lately.

"Did I say something wrong, Brandy?" She said as soon as they were alone again. "It was just seeing those poor people made me think ..."

"Of course not, Grace. Here let's eat, I'm starved."

They munched until the plates were bare, then sat over the last of the tea. "What else did you see, Grace? I haven't had time to look around at all."

"Well someone gave me free strawberries, and I listened to a man talk for a while. He was very excited about something. People aren't liked if they're different are they? It doesn't seem right if they can't help it."

"Some folks are narrow minded, best to ignore them. Wow, look at the time! I'd better get Kismet and start for home."

When they stood up two women darted for their seats and Grace and Brandy felt rushed outside into the now weary

and slow moving crowds.

They went around the back of the ring to the stable area and suddenly saw Michael approaching them from the stall where Kismet was tied.

Brandy ran forward. "How did you get here? I thought you had to work."

"Oh I wangled it, but not soon enough to see you perform. How'd he go? You tell me Grace. Give me your unbiased opinion."

Breathlessy Grace told all about it and then, while Brandy saddled Kismet, she went on about the things in the tent. This time she even told about the crippled man and the more she said about him the less important he seemed though she never mentioned the way he'd looked at her. She didn't even let herself think about that.

Brandy backed Kismet out.

"Clever fellow." Grace stroked his neck and held him while Michael gave Brandy a leg up. "Be careful now," she said, "There's an awful lot of traffic.

"We cut through fields. See you later."

Grace and Michael watched her ride away.

"Well."

His voice made Grace jump.

"Can I give you a lift home?"

"Thank you but I have my bike."

"No problem, I have the boss's pick-up. Let's go."

Grace smiled up at him and together they started toward

the parking lot. Where crowds were thick he took her arm and she was proud to be seen this way, the way they should be, belonging to each other. She felt hot and excited and happy.

Collecting her bicycle they pushed it to where the truck was parked. Michael lifted it over the tailgate then opened the cab door for her. "Enter my lady," he said grinning.

The drive home was heaven. Grace knew that only their unspoken pact not to hurt Brandy stopped them from saying the things they wanted to and as Indian summer day gave way to crisp night they closed the windows and Grace was lost in the nearness of him. In her mind the prosaic words he spoke were words of love and she could hardly bear it when she recognized the edge of the village and knew the ride was over.

"Here we are." He smiled at her.

"Yes," she whispered.

He heaved her bike onto the ground and she let her hand brush his when she took it from him. "Thank you, Michael." She looked into his face.

"You're very welcome. Hey Grace, you know something? You've got very beautiful eyes."

Her heart almost burst.

"See you." He jumped into the truck and roared away leaving her full of dreams.

Bemusedly she put the bike in the shed and went into the house.

The kitchen was dark and when she reached for the light

cord something gripped her wrist. The light showed Tom Daly glaring at her.

"I told you not to go. Leaving me alone all day, me a sick man. Wait'll I tell Doctor, miserable faithless bitch!" The sides of his mouth ran small bubbles. "Don't think I don't know about the money you take either. Stealin'!"

Rage boiled in his eyes and Grace's anger rose to meet it, poisoning the sweetness that had been. "I have a right to go out and to take the money when I need it. You can't stop me - ever!"

The man shouted back at her, his face red and swollen and Grace twisted free of him, knocked his whiskey bottle to the floor then went to the cupboard and tossed other bottles into the sink in a gurgling shambles of glass.

"Stop. Stop." He lumbered toward her and pulled at her arms. One push and he tottered backward, falling against the table then down to a heap on the floor.

The quiet was good. Only the liquor still trickled in the sink. Grace went upstairs to change and make sure her dress hadn't been damaged. She looked out at the hill silhouetted against the night sky and thought of all the good things that had happened during the day ending with the drive home. She leaned against Michael as he drove, warm and protected, heard his gentle voice in her ear.

"Darling Michael," she whispered.

"Grace!"

Light doused her thoughts and she couldn't breathe for fear.

Brandy stood at the door. "Your father. Come. Something's happened to him."

Grace relaxed. For a moment she'd thought Brandy knew about her and Michael. She couldn't have borne that. Dear Brandy, how she loved her just then. "Don't worry," she said, "there's nothing to be upset about."

"But Grace, he looks like he's dying!"

Grace smiled while Brandy took her arm and urgently pulled her downstairs. Dear silly Brandy, she thought, she doesn't understand. It doesn't matter if he dies. It would be better if he did, surely she knows that.

But she humored her friend, helping her straighten the body on the floor and cover it with blankets. When she first saw the chest rise and fall Grace felt great disappointment and hoped she'd imagined it, but she hadn't.

"I'll get the doctor on my way to see the horses are alright. You'll be O.K. won't you?" Brandy hesitated and then flew out the door.

Grace watched her run up the street. The hill looked clean and crisp, its trees almost bare. There'll be a frost tonight she thought.

The doctor's carlights swept the front of the house and soon he was bustling about the kitchen, from his bag to the figure on the floor. Grunting he motioned Grace to

help and between them they half dragged Tom Daly up to his room. Grace watched the doctor give him an injection then the stout little man looked at her over the top of his glasses.

"Well Grace, you've done it now. Let him drink didn't you? Gadded off and left him. It's the talk of the village how you've neglected your own sick Da. Shameful it is. Now he'll never walk again barring a miracle. It's as if you'd fed him poison."

The unfairness of it hurt Grace at first then anger came and she shouted at the condemning face. " What does the village know? What do you know? He's no better than a beast. I'll look after him because it's my job but he deserves nothing, nothing!'

"Grace, he's your ..."

Grace pushed her hands against her ears and shouted, "He's nothing, nothing!"

The doctor grasped his case, face brick red, and rushed from the house, stopping for a moment at the front door as though to say something but Grace slammed it before he could utter a word.

She leaned against the wood and suddenly came the realization the man would never walk again. She need never fear his invading the rest of the house. His friends wouldn't dare to sneak in with their bottles now. It was almost as though he had died and she went back to the sick room with a bounce in her step. Tom Daly's eyes were open watching her

and she went straight to him, leaning over the bed. His lips struggled to talk and she watched fascinated as no sound came. "Well old man. I guess you'll do as I say now. No whiskey. No complaining."

She watched the silent lips and felt amazingly free, as though a last tether had broken. She began to laugh, and laughed until tears ran and she was doubled over. Then seeing the expression in the man's eyes she laughed some more until, exhausted, she left him and clattered around the kitchen singing at the top of her lungs.

Grace looked after Tom Daly's bodily needs , but it was as though he were a giant doll and the work was her job, like Brandy and Michael had jobs.

She shopped at the village store choosing food she and Brandy liked and she took the radio she had never been allowed to listen to from the man's room and played it as she worked. She almost forgot someone inhabited the body she fed and bathed and no ugly sounds disturbed the house.

One afternoon as she and Doc returned from a rainy walk she saw a small bus parked in the middle of the village. It had wooden steps up to the door and Grace went to see what it was.

A woman in a green apron welcomed her. "Good afternoon. Would you care to come in?"

"What is it?" Grace asked.

"It's a travelling library. We go around to all the villages in this area once a month. If you fill out this form you can borrow any three books you choose and bring them back next time."

Grace wrote her name and address and entered the narrow room that had every available space filled with shelves of books.

"Just choose any three you like," the librarian said and Grace began to read the titles in front of her.

Other people shuffled past and though the place seemed crowded there was always space around her, and though she felt eyes watching her, when she looked up noone looked her way.

Wuthering Heights. She pulled it off the shelf . The girl on the cover reminded her of Lorna Doone and the young man could be a wild Michael. She kept it and enjoyed looking for two more to go with it.

Twitterings of conversation disturbed her.

"Disgusting I calls it, letting the likes of 'er run about like that."

"That's what I say. Poor father abed and all. No respect at all."

They talked about her like the doctor had said and Grace hurt deep inside to hear it. She wondered what she had done to make them dislike her so, and not caring what they were took down two more books, signed them out and started for home. Rain deepened her mood as it dripped mournfully from

bare branches and slid off thatch to splatter into dark puddles.

Once home she lit a fire in the sitting room and curled up in an arm-chair with one of the books. After a while her eyes left the page and stared into the flames seeing herself and Michael there.

Next day she took the bus into town and bought herself underclothes. She had only had cotton knickers and vests before and now she selected filmy pastel silks and two lace trimmed nighties. When she showed them to Brandy she looked suprised and said, "Grace, it looks as though you're preparing your trousseau."

"What's that?" Grace asked.

"It's for when a girl gets married, she gets all new things."

Grace laughed but from then on she added things secretly and it was to her trousseau.

Wet afternoons were good for reading and Grace read everything she could get hold of making every story her own. Each time she went to the store she bought a magazine and through their instructions added more make-up to the one lipstick and carefully worked on her face in the back of her mirror before she went into the street.

She stopped saying hello to people she passed and in the store looked only at the clerk. She knew now that anyone else would turn abruptly away from her smiles, but she had Brandy and Michael so why should she mind she asked herself.

One afternoon on her way home from the butcher's the school doors opened and shrieking children spilled onto the road ahead of her. They saw her and stopped. Grace smiled, her heart going out to them. Nice children, like little animals, she thought. They looked at her in silence. Why don't they smile back? Why are they so quiet? Grace's smile wavered and slowly the children encircled her and began to walk soundlessly around her in the rain. Their eyes were hard and glittering and Grace was afraid. Softly they started to chant a rhyme once idly told by a reminiscing father to his child, " Grace, Grace has a funny face." Grace spun around and around looking for a way of escape but there was none. "With crippled legs couldn't win a race." An echo came from long ago and she knew it would kill her if she listened and she blocked her ears. The faces went by one after another, mouths opening and shutting, distorted and cruel. Grace felt herself caught in a vortex dragging her down, down ... the faces vanished and Brandy stood beside her gesturing and shouting angrily after the running shapes.

The girl pulled Grace's hands gently from her ears. "It's all right Grace. They've gone now. Come on home."

Grace's fear melted and she slumped into Brandy's arms feeling a hand stroke her head and a soft voice. "There, there. It's all right."

Horror fell from her in tears that mixed with the rain. "I just wanted to be friends," she sobbed.

"Forget them," Brandy said, "The horrid little beasts have no manners," and with her arm across Grace's shoulders they started for home.

"But why did they pick on me?" Grace asked. "I wouldn't harm them."

"They probably would have done the same to me had I been alone and stood still. It's the way kids are these days."

"Really?"

"Really."

Grace looked into Brandy's eyes and believed her.

In the warmth of the house Brandy took the soggy package of meat. "I'll put this in the pantry, you go have a bath before you catch pneumonia. Michael's coming tonight and maybe we'll get him to stay and play scrabble with us. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes!" Grace hugged Brandy and ran upstairs.

The bath soaked away most of the bad feelings and when she came down Brandy helped in the kitchen and Grace often paused in her own work to watch her moving about so strong, and straight and beautiful. It was as though she watched herself and she felt whole and happy again.

Grace heard Brandy talking to Michael in the hall when he arrived and smiled to hear him remonstrate. "Couldn't we go somewhere alone?" How nice of him to pretend.

"Just tonight Mike, it's so cold out and Grace had a

bad time of it this afternoon. Please."

"O.K."

Just the right tone to hide his real joy Grace thought waiting to greet him.

It was a happy evening. The sitting room was like a cosy cave as they sat around the sheriton table in the flickering glow of the fire. Grace looked at the two faces alive with the flames of youth and knew hers must look the same. She thrilled to the joy of posession, her room, her Brandy and her Michael. When she came in from the kitchen later with tea and cake she stood a moment in the doorway unnoticed, watching herself and Michael. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

Grace forgot to worry about what the villagers thought of her and timed her trips to the store carefully to avoid the children. Her afternoon walks were short as it was too wet and cold to go far and it was a long time since she and Doc had been to the top of the hill. Often she didn't see the little dog for days and she missed him.

No weather stopped her at night though, for now whenever Brandy and Michael went to the pub she followed. Dressed in the black jeans and heavy black turtle neck sweater she had bought on one of her outings she would shadow their progress along dark lanes and slide to her watching place at The Mill's window. There she stayed, scarcely moving

for hours but she didn't feel the cold or wet, instead she felt the crush of people laughing and talking, smelled warm beer and smoke and held Michael's hand as he led her to a table. She listened to his words against a background of growly men's voices and the thud of darts as, warm and relaxed, they spoke of daily happenings and small gentle things and thoughts no one else would find of interest.

At closing time Grace followed the pair home, her steps as furtive as a deer's sliding invisibly through the night. She felt Michael's arm about her waist and when they reached the house she felt his goodnight kiss eat her lips, felt him press hard against her, felt her heart and bones melt.

If the weather was very bad Brandy and Michael would drive to the pub in the hunt pickup and Grace would walk alone, sliding on ice, blown about by the wind, her toes and fingers numb.

After one bitter night she awoke with a burning in her chest and a shivering that wouldn't stop. She had trouble getting downstairs and as soon as Brandy saw her she sent her right back up. "You look like death, Grace. I'll look after Mr. Daly. Don't worry."

Grace hadn't the strength to argue and pulled herself by the bannisters back up to her room, falling on the bed as though she'd never move again.

For three days she lived in a world of feverish dreams. Clear jumbled dreams through which every so often she saw

Brandy's face and felt her forcing juice between her lips. Once she saw Michael next to Brandy. "You've got to get out of this," she heard him say, "It's ridiculous the way you've become involved, looking after old Tom and everything. Soon as she's better you've got to leave."

"Oh Mike, I know I should but I don't know how. She needs me and she adores you."

"What do you mean she adores me?"

"Haven't you seen the way she looks at you when she thinks neither of us sees her? She's got a real crush on you."

"That's all I need - the village wierdo picking me for her ..."

"Michael!"

"I'm sorry and actually I can't help feeling fond of her but she is quite mad you know. She could do anything."

The voices faded leaving Grace frantic until she realized it was all part of her fever, like the dream about Doc falling off the elephants back or the dinosaur wandering through the village eating children.

On the fourth day she awoke clear-headed with just weakness left, and soon she was downstairs doing her usual chores.

Hunting season was now in full swing and Michael only had time to come over on sundays. Since Brandy hunted two days a week she and Grace spent many hours cleaning her black coat, breeches and boots and Grace loved to listen to

the stories she told as they brushed and polished. She imagined every fence jumped, each field galloped across, and held her breath when Kismet cunningly cleared the strand of wire hidden on the far side of a hedge. When he jumped the river everyone else either refused or fell into she clapped her hands and was triumphant when he gave the Master a lead over a tricky gate. He was the bravest horse in the world she was sure and she trusted him completely.

"How I wish I could watch you," she said one day.

"Next tuesday the meets right here at the Queen's Head. You could come to it," Brandy said as she boned a boot, "You'll see all the horses and people I've talked about, and Mike too- in his hunting pink. You must come, you'd love it!"

"Oh how super! I won't miss it for anything." Grace counted the days.

CHAPTER XVI

Monday afternoon black clouds rolled across the sky, growing darker and thicker until the hill was completely hidden. By six o'clock rain fell in a steady drowning downpour.

Grace looked out at it, the table still waiting to be cleared behind her. "Oh I hope it stops. I couldn't bear it if they cancel the meet."

"Surely it's raining too hard to keep on for long," Brandy said hopefully.

Grace shook her head and was aware all evening of the relentless rhythm outside and long after she had gone to bed she listened to the constant drumming on the roof.

Around mid-night the wind started and awakened by the gusting roar of it Grace went to her window and watched the black shapes of trees lash back and forth in the garden. The old house creaked and whistled while things thudded against its outside walls and a branch hit the glass, clutching like a hand then falling away.

Grace reached for the light switch, perhaps the storm wouldn't seem so violent with the light on, but nothing happened. Even the skeletons on the hill had been disarmed. A slate clattered down the roof and and crashed to the ground as Grace jumped back into bed and pulled the covers over her head.

The sun rose with the innocence of a child after a tantrum. Steam smoked from roofs and storm-littered streets and a pillow case waved like a flag of surrender from Grace's apple tree.

"I feel as if I were going hunting too," Grace laughed as she helped Brandy tie her stock.

"I've got butterflies," Brandy said. "Can't think why, must be the storm's got us worked up. Even Kismet wouldn't eat his breakfast though I told him today wasn't any different from any other hunting day. There. Guess I'm ready. See you at the meet."

"Have fun and be careful," Grace said as Brandy walked down the path, heavy boots clumping so unlike her usual light step.

Grace hurried into her coat and the headscarf Brandy had brought back from Devon. She took away the man's breakfast tray and snapped up his blind, making him blink and turn away from the morning's brightness. The street was already

lined with horse boxes and trailers with more coming all the time. Horses clattered down ramps and stood restlessly as their girths were tightened, curb chains checked and tail bandages removed. Men in top hats pulled on their gloves and women tucked their hair neatly beneath hunting caps.

Eager not to miss anything Grace left the house and made her way warily through the traffic, relieved when she reached the Inn and found a place against the wall from which to watch. Everything seemed more intense than usual, sounds sharper and colors more brilliant. Riders gathered, smart in black and scarlet. Bay, chestnut, black and gray horses clinked their bits and spattered foam, half timbered cottages spanking white behind them, and the green hill was backdrop to it all.

Greetings and chatter filled the air, mixed with snorts, stamping hooves and the occasional whinny, while the landlord of the inn and his wife passed among the crowd with silver trays of port and fruit cake.

Grace stood on tiptoe to look for Brandy and Kismet and finally she saw them coming up the road. The young horse looked ready to jump out of his skin, ears strained forward, head high and each step seemed he walked on springs. They stopped on the outskirts of the gathering and Brandy waved to Grace who beamed back.

The crack of a whip was heard and Grace saw a tumbling

sea of black and tan controlled by two men in scarlet. Doc who had been sitting pressed against her legs slunk off at arrival of hounds but Grace scarcely noticed for she recognized Michael as one of the two men. She drew in her breath to see how grand he looked and at that moment she knew she had never been happier in her life.

A toot of the horn and hounds moved off followed by the field. Grace watched Brandy's straight back and Kismet's heavy tail disappear between the walls to Kerwell.

Suddenly it was quiet. Spectators wandered away leaving the street deserted but for empty cars and horseboxes. Grace felt deserted too. Perhaps if she went up the hill ...

Whistling to Doc who came sheepishly from his hiding place she walked as quickly as she could past the farms and up the track. She prayed a fox wouldn't break away too soon and trotted when she could but it was hard going with broken branches to clamber over and gateways deep in mud. At the top of the steepest climb she turned left instead of right to the elephant, and passed through a wood. When she emerged from the other side she had a clear view of the hill where it dropped to Kerwell.

Grace held her noisy breath to listen but there was no sound of the hunt. Only a moaning breeze came from the trees behind and she sat on a wall and called Doc to sit at her feet. "We must keep still and be careful not to head the

fox if he comes. That's the worst thing we could ever do." She shaded her eyes and watched the distant fields.

At last, a sound. She'd almost given up hope. The faint yelp of a hound - then a chorus, and the horn's excited "gone away!" It sang on the wind and made her blood run fast so she jumped off the wall and strained to see and hear more. Small dots appeared on a faraway field. Paused. Circled. Then with a burst of music streamed up the distant hillside. Horses followed galloping along the edge of some plough, over a gate onto pasture. Which was Brandy? Grace knew Michael was one of the scarlet coats with hounds.

Suddenly she saw Kismet striding over the shoulder of a rise, Brandy leaning forward as they flew over a hedge and on up the hill. A cloud shadow covered them and Grace heard a faint shout. Saw the rider ahead of Brandy wave his arms. A horse to one side half fell then continued on, its rider also turning in his saddle to shout.

The sun caught something in the grass in front of Kismet's eager hooves , then the horse staggered, seemed to crumple at his knees, struggled on only to be drawn back onto the high voltage wires blown down in last night's storm. Grace felt her heart stop and as though in slow motion she saw Brandy fall free like a rag doll while Kismet , still fighting the lethal electricity fell across the fatal wire. He kicked then lay still as the girl beside him.

Grace was already running, her mind blank with panic. But it was too far. Too far and she took too long so that when she arrived they had already carried Brandy away and only Kismet was left. Grace saw his glazed half-open eyes and the foam on his lips as the wires swayed and hummed around him and she held onto Doc to keep him away.

"Kismet? Kismet?" She called softly half expecting the big horse to raise his head and scramble to his feet. "Kismet. Kismet." Louder this time. A fly buzzed around his ear, landed and fell to the ground. Doc whined and pulled to be free.

Grace turned from the horse and saw Linlea church spire gleaming in the distance. Brandy! Where is she. I must get to her. She began to run, climbing over walls and gates, tearing her coat on wire. Once she fell and lay with her face in the mud, blood roaring in her ears. She couldn't go on, it was impossible to run another step, but still she struggled up and began again. Oh Brandy, I'm coming, I'm coming!

She arrived in the village missing one shoe and ran down the street blind to the horse-boxes that had been so exciting an hour before. Cars waited outside Hislop House and she stopped, looking up at Brandy's window, afraid to go in. She'll be all right, she told herself, she's probably having tea right now. I should have been here to make it for her. She'll be broken hearted about Kismet. Poor Brandy. Poor Kismet up there alone on the hill. Poor beautiful Kismet.

Suddenly she felt very tired and began to cry. It took an effort to make herself move and enter the hall. I mustn't let Brandy see me cry, she told herself and sniffed wiping her eyes as she started upstairs.

Brandy's door was open and Grace halted at sight of two men by the bed. She crept in and stood against the wall watching and afraid. Where was Brandy?

"How is she Doctor?" Michael's voice asked.

"Not good but alive. Thank God for the leather saddle, it's all that saved her." He stepped back from the bed and Grace could see that someone lay under the covers. "Her parents must be called. Vertebral fractures, probably nerve damage and, of course, bad burns. Terrible voltage in those wires. Miracle she's alive though I doubt she'll walk again. You call her folks and find out what hospital they want her sent to then I'll make arrangements. No phone here is there?"

"No. We'll have to go to the Queen's Head. I hate to leave her."

"Nothing more we can do. Grace is here. She'll watch."

The men left leaving Grace staring at the bed. Slowly she went toward it seeing only the shape that never moved. "Brandy?" she whispered. "Brandy?" It was a jolt to see bandages where Brandy's face should have been smiling up at her, reassuring her that soon she'd be as perfect as ever.

They shouldn't hide beautiful Brandy under that stuff. Grace felt indignant and her hands reached for the tape.

Brandy's skin should be in the light, how could she see and talk bound up like that? "It's all right Brandy, I'll take it off so you can smile and tell me about Kismet and the farm."

Quickly her fingers worked, unwinding the strips of gauze layer after layer, and when the last of it came away she saw only swollen hideous flesh. With a moan Grace ripped the bandages from the hand that lay along the top of the blanket. It was misshapen and ugly and she stepped back from the bed.

Images flashed through her mind like pieces of a jigsaw ; the man in the tent, creatures in bottles, a crippled wild eyed woman in the mirror of a carousel, children taunting. The maimed, the ugly, the despised.

"Dear Brandy, don't worry. I won't let it happen to you. You won't be like them." Grace pulled the pillow from under the poor damaged head then gently, very gently pressed it over the mutilated face. "Dear beautiful Brandy. You must be perfect, always perfect," and Grace lay her own face on top of the pillow and stayed that way for a long time.

Grace left the bed and went to the window. Such a pretty day! I wonder if Mike will come. I'd better get ready just in case. She took a string of pearls from the drawer and clasped them around her neck. Then she brushed her hair and hummed a popular tune.

A movement at the door caught her attention and she saw Grace's father hanging onto the knob.

"Mr. Daly, what are you doing out of bed?"

He grunted, stared at her a moment, then shuffled slowly across the room. Grace continued to brush her hair. Should she wash it? No that could wait till tomorrow. What was that silly man doing over there moving pillows about on her bed? She should order him to go but somehow it seemed too much trouble.

He turned to face her and she wondered why she'd never noticed his resemblance to a Hereford bull. The thought made her smile.

He spoke in a hoarse whisper, each word an effort. "You'll not leave me with nothing by being put away for your murdering. Ol' Tom's not daft. Things'll be back to normal now." He shuffled away.

A car drew up outside. Michael. Perhaps he'll take me to the movies. Lipstick. Where's my lipstick. Maybe he'd like tea first.

The doctor passed her at the top of the stairs. Going to see the old man, she thought, and ran on right into Michael. Still in his hunting clothes. Why hadn't he changed? But he did look nice even if they were a mite muddy. "Michael, come into the kitchen for tea."

The doctor's voice came from upstairs. Dash him for spoiling things.."She's dead, Michael. Tore off her bandages.

Shock must have killed her. Weren't you watching her Grace?"

Aggravating man the doctor, talking nonsense as usual. She pulled a face at Michael and beckoned him to follow her into the kitchen but he started up the stairs instead. She went in to prepare tea. He'd be down in a second. Maybe they should get married soon. She didn't want to live here any longer. She put tea in the pot. Kismet! Had she fed him? Silly, she couldn't remember doing it but surely she must have. Ah, here's Michael. Smiling she ran to him and took his hand. "Are we going to the movies?" Why was his face so strained, as if he'd been crying. "Michael darling, what's the matter?"

"Leave me be, Grace. How can you ask what's the matter with Brandy lying ..." His voice broke and he turned away from her.

She put her hands tenderly on either side of his face. "But I'm here, Michael, your Brandy's here. I love you, don't be sad."

His hand when it hit her left her half-stunned. "Leave me be, damn it, leave me be!" she heard him shout, then she slept with her face on the nice cool floor.

The door bell woke her and she scrambled for the light as night seemed to have arrived. The bell rang again and she hurried to the door. When she opened it two muffled figures entered the hall. The woman removed her scarf re-

vealing her face and Grace gave a cry of joy. "Mother! Mother!"

She flung herself forward into the loving arms but they weren't loving. Instead the figure stiffened and pushed her away. "Who is this? What's happening?"

"It's Grace Daly." The doctor had appeared. "Seems to think she's your daughter. Always been strange, being a hunchback and all. Grace pull yourself together." He pulled her arm and she fought him, trying to get back to the woman.

"Mother! Mother!"

"Oh God, she even sounds like Brandy, get her away from me." Mrs. Warren turned weeping to her husband.

Grace saw her hands still reaching for Mrs. Warren's coat and they were big and ugly as no woman's hands should be. She felt herself falling, falling into a bottomless pit, and with a cry she limped and scrabbled upstairs to the vacant room with the full length mirror. In it she saw the crippled hunchback in mud covered torn clothing, one dirty bleeding foot bare, and a row of pearls gleaming grotesquely around her neck. Da's voice came from the past. "It's you. It's you. Who'd want an ugly thing like that around? No-one, that's who." She crawled to a dark corner and curled up as small as she could.

Many hours later when the house was quiet Grace hobbled

into her mother's room. She stroked the hair in the picture of Lorna Doone and patted the work-horses forever eating with their doves. She straightened the bedspread, dusted the empty dresser and closed a window that had somehow come open. Dawn kindled the sky behind the hill - soon time to start the muffins for Da's breakfast.

Grace went to her room wondering why her body hurt and was so weary and she took out her bible and read the poem inside. Remember her who gave you this ... yes mother ... dear mother. Must put on clean clothes for the day. A rock on the night stand took her attention and she picked it up. Ugly old thing. Opening her window she threw it out, listening to the thud as it landed, then she closed the window and pulled the curtains.

"Grace. Grace." Da called and she hobbled to his room and stood by his bed waiting.

His eyes searched her and stopped with a grin on her nervous writhing hands. "Get me whiskey, you hear, bitch?"

Grace started dutifully toward the door.

"Quick, woman, can't wait all day." His voice crowed with jubilation.

Outside doves moaned and the church bell began a slow measured knell.

Grace paused and turned back to look past her father, through the window and up the street. Her eyes barely touched the church but went on, searching until they stopped in the green of the deer-park. Then she smiled.

THE END